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The ethics of fiction:
Representations of New Zealand history in the poetry of Chris Tse and
Airini Beautrais, and how an author's sense of self affects the story

A thesis
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Abstract

The landscape of contemporary literature and film is saturated with interpretations of recorded histories and events. We have passed them down through generations—orally at first, written recordings when we had the comprehension and means to do so—each representation changed a little bit more by the time it reached us. But contemporary literature also draws from recent history, helping both reader and author to understand the contexts in which they exist. The resulting texts inform, and in turn are informed by, our cultures, ethnicities, religions, values, geography—all contributors to the sense of self with which we interpret fact and fiction.

This thesis looks at the representations of events within New Zealand history found in the poetry of Chris Tse and Airini Beautrais, considering these events through the specific lens of each author's culture and identity. From the murder of Joe Kum Yung in 1905 and the death of anarchist Neil Roberts in 1982 to the multi-layered history of the Whanganui region, each collection illustrates how an author's sense of self can alter history. Tse's *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes* and Beautrais' *Dear Neil Roberts* and *Flow: Whanganui River Poems* are examples of the impact of an author's voice on historical fact, and reinforce a need for accuracy in the poetry genre in the context of New Zealand history and literature. As poet James Brown asks: is verse the future of history?¹

¹ James Brown, qtd. in Beautrais' *Flow: Whanganui River Poems* [Inside Front Cover] (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2017)

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List of Diagrams

Pages	Diagram	Source
6	Hall's Model of Communication	<i>Model of Communication</i> , from Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse (Birmingham: Centre for Mass Communication Research, September 1973), p. 4. [accessed 4 December 2019]

Introduction

In 1905, Joe Kum Yung² was shot on Haining Street, Wellington, by Lionel Terry. This controversial murder was intended to act as an extreme form of advertising for Terry's yellow peril cause and his crusade to rid New Zealand of Chinese and other East Asian immigrants. More than 100 years later, the story of Joe and Terry and their place in New Zealand history was cemented by New Zealand-Chinese author Chris Tse in his debut poetry collection *How to Be Dead in a Year of Snakes*.³ Through the lenses of Joe and Terry, the text explores the ripple effect Joe's murder had on the Chinese community at the time, as well as their experiences and their alienation from a white-majority culture. Similarly, Airini Beautrais' poetry collections *Dear Neil Roberts*⁴ and *Flow: Whanganui River Poems*⁵ draw on stories from New Zealand history. These narratives feature the impact that the death of anarchist Neil Roberts had on New Zealand in the 1980s, including its impact on the life of Beautrais herself; the Whanganui region; and the River's awarded personhood. While growing up, I reshaped family stories and my own experiences into the modes of delivery I knew best at the time: acrostic, concrete and haiku poetry in early years, short stories and verse poems when I had a grasp on my vocabulary. But while I remained truthful to the story I was retelling, my inside knowledge of the characters I was writing about and the events surrounding them influenced my work and still do to this day. With this in mind, my question is: have Tse and Beautrais each presented a story to their audiences indirectly shaped by their individual cultural contexts?

² While his name has been anglicised over time, the name Joe Kum Yung follows the traditional Chinese format, with Joe as the family name and Kum Yung as the given names. As I refer to my authors and characters by their family names, I shall be referring to Joe Kum Yung as Joe hereafter, in order to be respectful to Chinese culture.

³ Chris Tse, *How to Be Dead in a Year of Snakes* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2014)

⁴ Airini Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2014)

⁵ Airini Beautrais, *Flow: Whanganui River Poems* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2017)

In the landscape of contemporary literature it is not uncommon to find texts that have stemmed from a new interpretation of an event or retelling: we are a storytelling species, and stories are a way of establishing our own truths from the tales passed down through generations. I use the term ‘stories’ here to distinguish between explicitly stated journalism or non-fiction texts, and texts influenced by creative writing, such as *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes*, *Dear Neil Roberts* and *Flow: Whanganui River Poems*. While these texts address a variety of subjects, each relates in some way to the corresponding author’s life. Indeed, in the words of Ivan Brady, writing “thrives in that part of consciousness where ideas and opinions are formed, constructing the poet himself or herself even as the experience is unfolding”.⁶ In this way, writing helps to shape the author’s understanding of certain concepts such as death, as I will explore in the following chapters. I posit that the texts have both influenced Tse’s and Beautrais’ perceptions of the world and have been influenced by each writer’s bias, thereby blurring the lines between the hard facts of the events they represent and the end product they each deliver to their audience.

Tse’s and Beautrais’ retellings are founded in the poetic genre, defined here by Yanal:

The poet, in order to make poetry and not something else, must write about possible, not actual, things. These possible things must be of a sort which could be characterized as types of persons doing things which those types would probably or necessarily do. Non-poetry—history, for example—must deal with actual, not merely possible, things. The historian must relate what actually happened to particular, actual people.⁷

⁶ Ivan Brady, 'In Defense of the Sensual: Meaning Construction in Ethnography and Poetics,' *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10.4 (2004), 622-644 <doi:10.1177/1077800404265719> (p. 630)

⁷ Robert J. Yanal, 'Aristotle's Definition of Poetry', *Noûs*, 16.4 (1982), 499–525 <doi:10.2307/2215204> (p. 499)

This definition is taken from a retelling of the philosopher Aristotle in Part IX of the *Poetics*. By posing his definition as an interpretation of the words of Aristotle, Yanal immediately impresses upon his reader his own truth that he has derived from Aristotle's writing. He states that this separation between history (clarified for contemporary purposes as non-fiction) and poetry rules out any chance that a tragedian, concerned with the names of historic figures, is able to write about actual persons and events because they have been made possible, as made clear by Aristotle.

In jointly defining poetry as writings about the possible, Aristotle and Yanal encourage us to perceive poetry as being based in fiction. This is further endorsed by Philip Gerard who claims that in defining the genre of non-fiction with negation, we are providing the audience with a disclaimer that we did not make up the events of the narrative, compared to genres such as fiction, poetry, even creative non-fiction:

as if making it up were the primary way to communicate the events of our world. As if, were any reader to come across a narrative of people, events, and ideas—a story—he or she would assume, unless assured otherwise, that the story was fiction.⁸

Conversely, the genre of non-fiction, where the backgrounds of my chosen texts stem from, satisfies “our hunger for the real and our need to make sense, make order, out of chaos”.⁹ At the same time, non-fiction texts establish the facts of a specific event from which we derive the truth, according to our own personal perspectives, and present the actual rather than the possible. For creative writing purposes, according to Stuart Hall, these facts must first be perceived as “meaningful discourse and meaningfully decoded... framed by the structures of

⁸ Philip Gerard, *Creative Nonfiction: Researching and Crafting Stories of Real Life* (Illinois: Waveland Press, 2004), p. 3.

⁹ Ron Powers, as quoted by Gerard, p. 3.

understanding”.¹⁰ Before a message can be decoded, however, Hall argues that it must first be encoded, regardless of genre, and that the object of production is a message in a “symbolic form” that exists within the rules of language.¹¹ In the context of the texts I will be examining, this symbolic form exists as a collection of poems. Each collection is structured using conventions of creative writing, in order to encode a specific message about the alienation of Chinese in a white-majority New Zealand culture, the reasons behind a man's death or the recorded history of the Whanganui region. Before the facts of each event can be circulated by the author in a symbolic form, however, they must first become stories formed and encoded by the author’s interpretation of language, and of the event itself.

Hall's argument posits that the creation of a text is framed inadvertently throughout the production process by assumptions about the audience, ideologies, knowledge and definitions applied to the text by the author and those working on the piece. However, the production process ultimately draws on topics and agendas from the wider culture in which the author and the audience exist. The audience, therefore, is both the source of the story and the receiver of the story, having influence over the research material and broadcasting different biases and ideas that are included in the socio-cultural system the creator draws from. Production and reception are thus important moments in the creation of a text, the latter being predominant because “it is the point of departure for the realization” of the story: the moment when it is read and given context assigned by the audience.¹² However, despite the audience being both the source of information and the receiver of the message once encoded by the author, the two moments are different aspects within the process. Ralph Waldo Emerson famously said that “there is then creative reading as well as creative writing”; this has been interpreted by Rebekah

¹⁰ Stuart Hall, 'Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse' (paper for the Council of Europe Colloquy on 'Training In The Critical Reading of Television Language', University of Leicester, 1973), p. 3.

¹¹ Hall, pp. 1-2

¹² Hall, p. 3

Taylor and Craig Jordan-Baker to mean that the construction of a message is not reliant on the writer alone but is a process of meaning-making that exists between writer and reader.¹³ The act of reading and the understanding of the reader is affected by their own context; as the message has been altered slightly by the author during the encoding process, so the message changes during reception based on socio-economic¹⁴ status, education and life experiences. Figure 1 shows the process and illustrates the differences between the meanings assigned while encoding and decoding occurs. Texts and their meanings do not exist in isolation, and require creativity from the reader in order to decode the message.¹⁵

We have come to expect fiction and poetry to follow certain conventions, making it easy for us as an audience to decode the importance and relevance of a story. Robert Pierce, in an attempt to define the ever-expanding poetry genre, asserts that the genre contains a “family of traits that incline us to call something a poem when we find a selection of them in it”.¹⁶ These six traits are rhythm, imagery, beauty, unity, strangeness or playfulness, and ineffability of meaning.¹⁷ None of these features lends itself solely to poetry in order to define the genre; instead, Pierce claims that these traits help to understand what poetry is and can be. Poems themselves are categorised as poetry only by our understanding of the term and how newly encountered texts resemble what we understand poetry to be, in comparison to other literary genres, such as journalism and non-fiction.¹⁸ So what bearing does this have on the decoding process, for a reader? If a text is encoded in a certain recognisable type, for example as a news

¹³ Rebekah Xanthe Taylor and Craig Jordan-Baker, 'Fictional Biographies: Creative Writing and the Archive', *Archives and Records*, 40.2 (2019), 198-212 <doi: 10.1080/23257962.2017.1419944> (p. 4)

¹⁴ I use the terms socio-economic context and socio-cultural context interchangeable, as one can feed into the other.

¹⁵ Taylor and Jordan-Baker, p. 4.

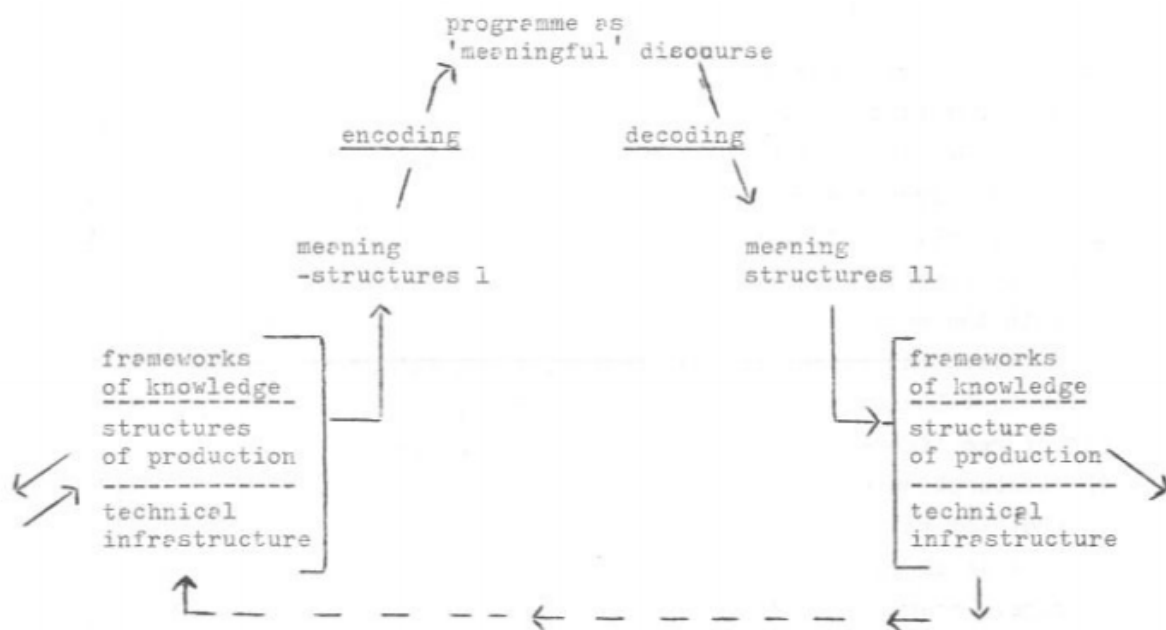
¹⁶ Robert Pierce, 'Defining "Poetry"', *Philosophy and Literature*, 27.1 (2003), 151-163 <doi:10.1353/phl.2003.0030> (p. 153)

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 152-161.

¹⁸ Anna Christina Ribeiro, 'Intending to Repeat: A Definition of Poetry', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 65.2 (2007), 189-201 <<https://www.jstor-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/stable/pdf/4622223>> [accessed 11 October 2019] (p. 189)

article or non-fiction essay published by a reputable news source, it is likely that the text will be decoded in a manner highly symmetrical to the way the information was treated in the encoding process.¹⁹

Figure 1. Hall's Model of Communication²⁰



Note. Hall's model of communication illustrates the encoding and decoding process that applies during the production of a specific text. The frameworks of knowledge, relations of production, and technical infrastructure influence the meaning that the creator applies to the specific text, cited here as 'meaning structures 1'. This may not be the same as 'meaning structures 11' in the decoding process, as the decoded meaning is dependent on the audience's own frameworks of knowledge, relations of production, and technical infrastructure (referred to as 'socio-cultural context' in this section).

¹⁹ Hall, p. 6.

²⁰ Stuart Hall, *Model of Communication*, diagram, from *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*, (Leicester: University of Leicester, 1973)

Hall is writing in relation to television broadcasting, but his theory of encoding and decoding may be applied to all modes of communication and storytelling. Applying Hall's theory to Tse's and Beaudrais' poetry collections suggests that their readers will decode the events of *How to Be Dead in a Year of Snakes*, *Flow: Whanganui River Poems* and *Dear Neil Roberts* according to the genre in which the stories are retold: as fictional representations. This also suggests that the texts are affected by the bias of the audience before each author begins the encoding or writing process, and that each author presents to their audience not the true facts of each event, but versions altered by bias of the information source, the mode of delivery, and the authorial presence each brings during the writing process. Margaret Freeman, Co-Director of the Myrfield Institute for Cognition and the Arts, writes that the question of authorial representation focuses on meaning and interpretation of the interaction between author and reader: how readers decode what the author has encoded in the text.²¹ Arguing against Hall, to whom communication between an author and their audience is systematically distorted by the differences between creator and audience,²² she claims that communication is successful when readers correctly interpret the intention of the author through internal evidence, or the "aesthetic' principles of literary form".²³ However, as Freeman notes, the term 'intention' in regard to authors has the same etymological root as the word 'intense'²⁴ – therefore the communication of meaning intended by an author may instead refer to the "signaling of emotional and sensory experiences, which, if successful, evoke affective responses in the reader".²⁵ These emotional experiences are usually signalled to the reader through the use of creative writing techniques.

²¹ Margaret H. Freeman, 'Authorial Presence in Poetry: Some Cognitive Reappraisals', *Poetics Today*, 36.3 (2015), 201-231 <doi:10.1215/03335372-3160733> (p. 204)

²² Hall, p. 1.

²³ Freeman, p. 204.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

Authorial presence in a work of fiction is often revealed to the reader in two ways: direct connections between the writer's life and their works, or by invoking an authorial persona in order to create distance between the author's life and the text being decoded.²⁶ In the context of contemporary literature—specifically the works of Tse and Beutrais—authorial presence is usually felt through the direct connection each text has to the life of its author, drawing on links through family, identity and geographic location for source material. In doing so, is it not possible for each author to employ certain techniques specifically to adapt real life events to fiction? For example, changing the name of a character or employing visceral, embodied imagery can lead the reader's imagination down a different path, and create a different bodily response to a text. Henrik Skov Nielsen writes:

When we fashion stories in real life interactions we do so in incredibly complex ways. We use all kinds of techniques and tricks to suit them for our different purposes including exaggerating, fictionalizing, telling backwards, leaving out and filling in details, telling in another's voice, using free indirect discourse [...] As soon as new tricks are invented for one genre or purpose, they seem to be stolen and transferred to other genres and situations, frequently including transfers between fictional and non-fictional genres.²⁷

It is this encoding of historical events and the relationship between fact and authorial presence that I explore. In Chapter 1, I investigate the origins of the intersection of fictional representation and journalism in order to provide a sound understanding of authorial presence. To do this, I examine our natural tendencies to tell stories and the methods we choose in order to do so, with a focus on the theories of Ivan Brady, Nielsen, Gerard, and Cristina Archetti. In

²⁶ Freeman, p. 202.

²⁷ Henrik Skov Nielsen, 'Fictional Voices? Strange Voices? Unnatural Voices?' in *Strange Voices in Narrative Fiction*, ed. by H. S. Nielsen, P. K. Hansen, R. Reitan & S. Iversen (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), pp. 55-82 (p. 56)

Chapter 2, I analyse each of the three texts by Tse and Beautrais, assessing their use of fictional techniques in presenting the original story in a truthful and relevant manner. Beginning with Tse's *How to Be Dead in a Year of Snakes*, I examine how the murder of Joe Kum Yung in 1905 contributed to and shaped the texts within Tse's poetry collection. Next, I look at Beautrais' *Dear Neil Roberts* in relation to the impact on a community following a shocking and well-publicised occurrence. Finally, I turn to Beautrais' *Flow: Whanganui River Poems* as an example of geographic location, personal history and the retelling of unrecorded historical stories. In Chapter 3, I examine the research process and the ethics behind each text, and conclude with recommendations as to how the original stories can be protected despite the inclusion of authorial presence in creative non-fiction outputs. In doing so, my aim is to provide a deeper understanding of the impact of an author's voice on journalistic fact in the context of New Zealand history and literature. With the help of Hall's theory of communication, and the ideas of current practitioners exploring the relationship between fact and fiction, I hope to highlight the issue of accurate representation during the research and creation of a narrative.

Chapter 1

In addition to being a storytelling species, humans are sensual and intellectual creatures, and we experience the world through these combined faculties. The world itself is constructed through meanings and semiotics, and such meanings are constructed through the sensuality of the body and our emotional responses. Ivan Brady claims that the body is a platform for interpreting events that we experience in this “Made World”,²⁸ whether directly—for example, the immediate bodily response to reading a newspaper article about the murder of Joe Kum Yung, or the actions of Neil Roberts—or indirectly, when learning about each event as told through our cultures and histories. As Brady notes, “we construct ourselves together in mutual communication on terms set largely by our cultural orientations”.²⁹ These orientations determine the positive or negative outcomes of our bodily experiences; to return to the theories of Stuart Hall, our physical senses and reactions decode the world around us, informed by our understanding of our individual socio-economic contexts. As meaning-makers, we are compelled to seek meaning from our own experiences, and thus determine for ourselves whether they are fact or fiction.

However, it is the way in which we construct and interpret stories that is the main point of enquiry. In the following sections I examine writing as a method of seeking meaning and clarification; additionally, of fulfilling our natural urge to pass on stories as we hear them, the “most fundamental of human activities”.³⁰ These rationales introduce the problem of what we do not hear and how that informs our interpretation of the action; and thus how we encode the information for our readers, and the reception of the text. Let us take, for example, a scientific paper with the purpose of translating a research study to those not involved in the process. In

²⁸ Brady, p. 624.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 627.

³⁰ Brady, p. 630.

order to ensure the reader correctly understands the specifics of the research study and the final results, the language used is chosen to be “transparent or invisible”,³¹ clinical in its delivery of the information that the writer has chosen to pass on. A barrier is established between the encoder and the decoder, but the mode of delivery and the language used eliminates any uncertainty in the decoding process. A reader is certain of the author’s intentions and the text is decoded in the meaning structure in which it was encoded. However, technical knowledge in the reader’s socio-economic framework can still affect how the information is received. Cristina Archetti argues that the same language techniques are used in journalism practice, citing journalism as a platform of “objectivity, the facts, the detached observation” that remains uninfluenced by personal biases and voices no matter what platform it is viewed on, or who it is encoded or decoded by.³² On the contrary, ‘humanists’, and most notably poets, use language that “openly displays their presence as observers and authors in their works”.³³ In doing so channels for discussion are opened up between the author and the audience, but the inclusion of authorial presence in fiction can complicate the reception of the information encoded in the text.

Nielsen suggests that “the voice we hear in fiction is actually often the voice of the author and not the voice of a narrator”.³⁴ Nevertheless the author is unable to act as a reporter and retell something that has happened because they are in the process of encoding and inventing the action. Therefore, a narrator is inserted within a piece of fiction in order to provide valuable details to the reader that ease the decoding process. However, when an author employs

³¹ Brady, p. 627.

³² Cristina Archetti, 'Bringing Back Emotion, Imagination and the Senses: Creative Writing in Journalism Research', *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics*, 11.2 (2015), 239-248
<doi:10.1386/macp.11.2.239_3> (p. 240)

³³ Brady, p. 627.

³⁴ Henrik Skov Nielsen, 'Unnatural Narratology, Impersonal Voices, Real Authors, and Non-Communicative Narration', in *Unnatural Narratives - Unnatural Narratology*, ed. by J. Alber & R. Heinze (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2011), pp. 71-88 (p. 72)

first person narration, they are concurrently inventing details and driving a narrative forward. Taking Tse's *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes* as an example, the use of first person narrative allows room for Tse to invent details around the murder of Joe and the individual reactions of both Joe and Terry that neither character could have known about the other. For example, '(Charm attack)'³⁵ references Terry in a way that the voice of Joe would never have been able to, yet the audience is now privy to the rationale behind Terry's actions:

From the beginning Lionel knew he was bound for greatness and thought he might very much like to live forever. To this end he claimed as much space as possible, never looking back [...]

Lionel was a creature fooled into keeping score for all the wrong reasons. He felt it spreading in his mind, that nameless hollow thrumming with pros and cons.

Suspicion.³⁶

Tse takes control of the narrative most often throughout the collection, with only a handful of poems written from the perspectives of Joe or Terry; in using first person narration sparingly, he is able to construct information of his own and reflect his own personal ideas as a second-generation Cantonese-Chinese writer living in New Zealand. Interestingly, the poems in which the first person narrative technique are employed are the ones in which Tse openly acknowledges himself as taking up the role of narrator, for example '(In which the author interviews a dead man)' and '(In which the author interviews a Mr Terry)'. Note the change in distance that occurs between the author/narrator and the audience when Tse uses the formal name of Mr Terry in the title of the latter. In the view of Käte Hamburger, the use of first person narrative suggests that true fiction, referred to as "epic fiction", does not contain statements

³⁵ All titles from *How to Be Dead in a Year of Snakes* are written as they appear in the collection.

³⁶ Tse, p. 16.

that can be “true or false in respect to reality”,³⁷ but in this case sentences are constructed by the sentences that surround them:

If there is a statement subject, then it will narrate something that (in the world of fiction) exists prior to its narration. If there is no statement subject, then the sentences of fiction will produce the world they describe.³⁸

As a result, Hamburger argues that fictional narratives in first person do not belong to the genre of fiction. The question remains whether this is the case with Tse’s *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes*, and subsequently Beutrais’ collections which contain a similar combination of fact and authorial invention and presence. If we consider the perspective of Hamburger, *Dear Neil Roberts* should not be considered fiction as the story of the collection is predominantly told through first person narrative. Fiction, by definition, is “the general term for invented stories, now usually applied to novels, short stories, novellas, romances, fables and other narrative”.³⁹ None of these terms applies either to the collection itself, excepting the term ‘narrative’ in that the work follows a defined plot outlined by Beutrais herself in order to emphasise certain aspects of the event, relationships, and personal response. Considering both the literal definition of fiction and Hamburger’s argument, we are instructed to consider *Dear Neil Roberts* as a factual representation of the events of Roberts’ death.

In his essay, Nielsen writes that the impersonal voice presents and creates the characters in all texts, despite referring to one of the characters in the first person, because of knowledge

³⁷ Nielsen, ‘Unnatural Narratology’, p. 73.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 73.

³⁹ Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 4th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), Oxford Reference Online <<https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/>> [accessed 6 May 2020] s.v. fiction.

that only the author must have.⁴⁰ For that reason the impersonal voice of the constructed narrator and the author are intertwined throughout the text in circular logic:

From the observation that the author is not reporting one concludes that the narrator is; and from the observation that the narrator is not reporting one concludes that the author is.⁴¹

So how we should respond when the narrative strategies employed by the author in the encoding process change the genre of a text via Hall's process of communication? As sensual and emotive readers, we are already prone to compare the texts we read to reality, not only as a form of escapism but as a way to make sense of the world we exist in and our individual contexts. We impose binary opposites such as 'fiction' or 'non-fiction' based purely on the idea that if a text is one it cannot be the other. Yanal and Aristotle encourage us to perceive poetry as fiction, however Hamburger introduces a conflicting viewpoint with her ideas on the use of first person narrative. Additionally, Beutrais includes the blunt language of found newspaper articles and direct quotes⁴² as a way of providing juxtaposition with traditional poetic language:

If you quote people, you're using language generated in a way that you might not yourself [...] I suppose with poetry you're always playing around with voice, so by including quotes from people you're bringing in other voices beside your own.⁴³

⁴⁰ Nielsen, 'Unnatural Narratology', p. 76.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 78.

⁴² The following poems from the collection *Dear Neil Roberts* by Beutrais are composed of, or based on, interviews, articles and advertisements found in local press at the time of the event: 'Man', 'Time', 'By way of explanation'. Other poems include direct quotations, but as these are from personal interactions of Beutrais they cannot be authenticated.

⁴³ Airini Beutrais, Interview with Olivia Mead (Online, 11 March, 2020)

As a result, contention exists not only between the purpose of the author and the understanding of the reader, but between the identity of the text as it relates to traditional labels. Naturally, this makes it difficult for the reader to wholeheartedly participate in the text and can create confusion around the subject as it is decoded. What Nielsen makes clear is that the inclusion of authorial presence affects the reception of a text, and that changing the language of an interpretation, whether it be through transparent vocabulary, creative writing or perspective, changes the reader's analysis of the subject, ultimately shifting the message from the author's reality to the reality imposed by the reader—no matter how the story began.

“Both poetry and journalism respond to events[...] and, more broadly, to life.”⁴⁴

In a 2009 study by Monica Prendergast, multiple terminologies were employed that revealed the hybridity of research and narrative and combined the transparent, scientific language of research with creative writing strategies and techniques. These terminologies included labels such as “data poetry”, “field poetry”, and “poetic reflection”.⁴⁵ From these terms Prendergast infers that the potential power of poetry, “to synthesize experience in a direct and affective way”⁴⁶ is not only applicable to constructed narratives but also to the understanding of information in a research setting. The term ‘research’ is used here to refer to the process of information-gathering, whether that is from a direct scientific study, or the collation of material by a writer for a planned narrative. When researchers dissect their results, the “researcher is interconnected with the researched” as this process is informed by their response to the information gathered.⁴⁷ This suggests that each researcher will create differing

⁴⁴ Archetti, p. 241.

⁴⁵ Monica Prendergast, "'Poem is What?'" Poetic Inquiry in Qualitative Social Science Research', *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 1.4 (2009), 541-568 <doi:10.1525/irqr.2009.1.4.541> (pp. 543-544). The full list of terminologies can be viewed on pp. 543-544 of this article.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 545.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 547.

versions of a narrative based on the same data, as they each apply their own views to the information gathered in the early stages of creation. Further to this, Archetti argues that non-academic writing such as poetry can play a much more significant part in the research process than forming a bond between the researched and the researcher.⁴⁸ It provides a platform for the writer to reflect on their findings, making apparent “those gut feelings and impressions that inevitably guide the researcher in the interpretation of the results”⁴⁹ and a way of “interpreting and therefore of knowing”.⁵⁰

This is true not only from the perspective of a writer but also the perspective of the audience who will work to decode the text via Hall’s process of communication. If we, the audience, are subject to the research and the data behind the text, we will decode this information according to the way in which it is presented to us as products of our respective socio-economic backgrounds. Reading a news article or scientific paper appeals to the intellectual within us, while poetry appeals to the sensual and emotive. We are able to more fully understand and participate in the world when we are informed through both the data and the senses:

Academic enquiry alone is able neither to capture nor to convey the full complexity of reality. In this respect sensuous scholarship, as ‘a mixing of head and heart’, is a more comprehensive research practice.⁵¹

However, we must remember here that authors and writers themselves are also to be considered sensuous and intellectual beings. Brady states that the objectivity of research is fictional, as all research begins with an observer applying their own bias and opinions to the results of their

⁴⁸ Archetti, p. 242.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 242.

⁵⁰ Brady, p. 633.

⁵¹ Archetti, p. 240.

research. Nevertheless, providing such verbal sketches as poetry is a way to document the unravelling of a concept that the audience would otherwise not see, enabling the researcher “to achieve greater intellectual honesty”.⁵² In doing so, the author is honest about their personal inflections on the original story, which we as an audience are driven to accept in exchange for the entertainment value. Further to this, we are able to engage with the content of the poetry more fully, as well as understand the author as we undergo with them the journey of realisation.

While exploring the concepts of death within Chinese culture and the Chinese reaction to tragedy through the story of Joe and Terry, Tse undertook additional research and wrote more poems in order to flesh out the narrative. What he found was the interconnectedness of Joe and Terry, and a story that was publicised by the actions of Terry, a white supremacist. In line with the claims of Prendergast, Archetti and Brady, Tse's effort to reclaim Joe's voice and his part in the story became a method for understanding his culture and the processing of his grandmother's death, synthesizing his own experience with that of his characters:

I started off wanting to write a very true-to-the-facts-narrative sequence of poems, but over the years it changed a lot as I lived with the story and untangled what it might mean to me—bringing some Chinese culture into it and talking about how the Chinese view death and the importance of a proper burial and all the rites that we do. And that was when my grandmother passed away in 2011; that going through the grieving process with her really made me understand personally what needed to happen for Joe Kum Yung [...] It was from that sort of angle that I could finally flesh out the rest of it and finish the poems, and tell the story as a whole.⁵³

⁵² Archetti, p. 242.

⁵³ Chris Tse, Interview with Olivia Mead (Online, 9 March, 2020)

According to Archetti, good writing is about understanding and making a human connection with the reader. If this is the case, how was Tse to relay the story of Joe and Terry *without* the context of death and ritual aligning with his situation at the time of writing? As stated by Stephen Burt, “everybody, not just poets, sometimes has to focus on the ‘how’, on the ‘how it felt’, to make a familiar story sound new”.⁵⁴ Tse would have been unable to draw on data alone to reclaim the voice of Joe, but needed to assimilate his own grandmother's death in order to produce a rounded narrative for his reader. Burt claims that poems “in turn suggest (they don't state) why the people in the poem did what they did, how they came to feel as they do, what it's like to be them”.⁵⁵ Inevitably, producing a poem of such format requires lateral thinking by the writer. The combination of personal history and belief fills the gaps between vivid details provided by research, creating a well-rounded narrative. This raises questions about the world in which the author operates, “the role of imagination, sensory perceptions and emotions in everyday practice”,⁵⁶ and how the author responds to the world and the context in which it was formed. Nonetheless, and while Tse was honest about the inclusion of these personal details, they altered the story that Tse delivered to the audience at the end of the creation process.

Gerard states that creative non-fiction is “timely, but also timeless”⁵⁷ as it is based on events happening in the world that have relevance at a particular moment. However, the creative licence and elements that an author introduces, such as narrative voice, make it a story for entertainment purposes and something that an audience can return to when the subject is no longer of importance. In drawing on non-fiction events, does an author not turn poetry into creative non-fiction, and so can it also be considered timely yet timeless? How many people

⁵⁴ Stephen Burt, ‘Poetry: The News that Stays News’ *NiemanReports* (2013)

<<https://niemanreports.org/articles/poetry-the-news-that-stays-news/>> [accessed 8 April 2020]

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, para. 14.

⁵⁶ Archetti, p. 240.

⁵⁷ Gerard, p. 2.

still return to the works of Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Frost, many years after they were first written? When dividing the world into History and Poetry, Aristotle included creative non-fiction in Poetry; even Homer's *The Iliad*, based on myth, was used to discover the remains of Troy.⁵⁸

Despite this, the argument remains that while we use poetry to interpret the world around us, and in exceptional cases to discover more about the history of our world, the inevitable inclusion of authorial presence removes any guarantee that the stories we are told are truthful.

**Telling stories is a natural tendency,
as well as the tendency to lie**

Constructing and interpreting stories through poetry is a method of seeking meaning and clarification, of responding to events in history and in our individual contexts. Conversely, poetry fulfils our natural urge to relay stories as we hear them. This goes some way towards eliminating the personal bias and perspective that occurs when an author ruminates on their subject for too long, but poses its own challenges to the relationship and understanding formed between an author and their audience. It brings into question the truth of the source event as it is passed down through generations, from different tongues and cultures to different perspectives and understandings. Returning briefly to the example of Homer:

At first Homer's works were passed down by word of mouth. Today we tend to find the idea of anybody memorising the whole of Homer unlikely, but history records that Cassander (d.272 BC) for one, could spout the entire *Iliad* and *Odyssey* by heart [...]

⁵⁸ Gerard, p. 3.

The point is that Homeric epic could have been passed down almost *word for word*—even if, from time to time, singers did make changes and additions.⁵⁹

Such changes and additions were common practice in verbal storytelling, from which the genre of poetry derives. The impact of these alterations on the story itself has been accepted throughout the years as creative licence — encouraging, if not giving outright, permission for us to alter the truth of our source material and subject. However, this is not just a conscious decision, but a natural tendency ingrained within us, no matter the output of the story we are trying to retell. Whether we are writing a novel, poetry, a journalistic article, or an academic paper such as this, as soon as we pick up a pen or begin typing on a computer – we inevitably make changes according to our own bias. We move the focus from one point of the story to another, limited by our point of view; we imply judgements about a character; we move events around to suit our entertainment-driven agenda.⁶⁰ Using another example from Ancient Greece, Sprott goes on to detail the extent such alterations have on the final story through the methods of the writer Plutarch:

In the *Life of Antony*, Plutarch shows little interest in history. He has plenty of material, though it's not always the kind he wants. Sometimes the trouble is a gap, such as the gap of Antony's youth. But gaps could be filled. Plutarch reshapes whole episodes. He manipulates his source material, shifts stories to a different context, makes complex detail simple. To sharpen contrast, he exaggerates. Details, such as the course of a battle, he makes up. Plutarch manages to mention a non-existent range of hills and invent a major river. In history and rhetoric the good leader leads battle-charges himself, shows foresight, and daring: so does Antony. In New Comedy, the

⁵⁹ Duncan Sprott, 'A Short History of Historical Fiction: Gilgamesh to Rome', in *Writing Historical Fiction: A Writers' and Artists' Companion*, ed. by C. Brayfield and D. Sprott (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 59-72 (p. 63)

⁶⁰ Gerard, p. 4.

soldier is boastful, lecherous, extravagant and gullible: so is Antony. And Kleopatra [sic] behaves like the stock figure of the flatterer, adapting herself to her victim's tastes.

Not much of this will have happened in Plutarch's sources.

What did Plutarch think he was doing rewriting his source material like this? Would he have admitted that he was sacrificing the truth? Or would he have felt that he was *reconstructing* reality, arriving intuitively at a picture which simply *must* have been true? Probably a bit of both. For Plutarch, telling a story in the best way is the same as telling it with the most plausible detail: this is creative reconstruction. Quite often, Plutarch was *improving on the truth*, and he knew it. At the same time, total fabrication of fictional details is rare. He does not paper over gaps. When he does fabricate detail, he is *reconstructing*, not sacrificing, the truth; he can usually say 'it must have been true'. Writing some 150 years after the event, with half the story he wanted to tell lost, or forgotten, the best Plutarch—or anybody else—could do was informed guesswork: creative reconstruction.⁶¹

Plutarch's aim was to translate the narrative of *Life of Antony* into his constructed reality. In the words of Sprott, he "sacrifices precise historical truth to point a more interesting moral, or to tell a better story".⁶² Sprott asserts that, in doing so, Plutarch can claim his constructed reality as truth, and in some cases this may be considered correct. Plutarch is drawing on his own knowledge to reconstruct and create a full, rounded narrative. We see this reflected often in the contemporary landscape of literature and poetry, with Tse being a leading example of creative reconstruction in the poetry genre. Tse himself admits that a lack of information on his leading

⁶¹ Sprott, p. 72

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 71.

character led to an exploration of new themes and voices, papering the gaps of contextual research:

I was hindered by the fact that there weren't many facts. I was basically just using what I could find as scaffolding and going from there. I've written poems in the voices of Joe Kum Yung and Lionel Terry, clearly made up, and it was just me trying to find a way not only into their headspace and their voice, but to give myself, the author, a way to vent some of those emotions and frustrations that would have been going through their heads at the time.⁶³

If Tse was unable to find the information needed on his character, as one man's voice was inextricably linked to another, he needed to paper the gaps as Plutarch had done with Antony, and this was done based on his own personal history and understanding. In doing so, he irrefutably included his own bias and authorial presence. But consider the alternative: in portraying only the facts, there would be no story on Joe Kum Yung, and Lionel Terry would once more have remained the voice of a story about race and discrimination, a fixture in the history of Chinese people in New Zealand. Furthermore, if Tse was unable to find the details about Joe, neither would his audience. Can creative reconstruction be a lie when the audience doesn't know the truth? Can Tse really say, as Plutarch may have, that his retelling must have been true? In some poems within the collection, this reconstruction is obviously a lie: take, for example, the poem 'To kill a man', in which he explores a tangent around Joe and Terry as lovers:

there by your side
in the wide-awake night

⁶³ Tse, Interview.

breathless bedfellow
 motionless lover⁶⁴

From what knowledge we have of their story so far, provided through the rest of the collection, we know that this cannot be possible. We have three options: to believe the narrative of racism and murder, or to believe the narrative we are presented with in this poem and imagine the rest of the story as a lie. The third option is to consider Tse's interpretation one of extreme intentionalism, in that the content of the narrative is exactly what he intended his readers to imagine.⁶⁵ He does not lie or deliberately mislead us at any part during the narrative, but includes such tangents as 'To kill a man' to provide a happier perspective on a deeply unsettling tragedy:

There is a poem where I imagine what if they were lovers, and that was just a little path I went on to see if that went anywhere, and even though that poem isn't explicitly a 'what if they were lovers poem' there are traces of that still in it. I think I wanted to imagine an alternate life for both of them.⁶⁶

Tse reveals just enough of the story for his audience to appreciate these moments in the narrative for what they are: fiction. These are Plutarch's range of hills and non-existent river, in the context of the author's intended message, fabricated to contrast with the tragic truth. However, as telling as these moments may be—and a good narrator will make it obvious that he, or she, is lying, thereby allowing the reader to feel intelligent and more involved whilst revealing the emotional heart of the story—I argue that the outputs of fictional representations are irrelevant. Kathleen Stock's theory on extreme intentionalism is based on an idea generally

⁶⁴ Tse, p. 32.

⁶⁵ Kathleen Stock, *Only Imagine: Fiction, Interpretation and Imagination* (Online: Oxford University Press, 2017) <doi:10.1093/oso/9780198798347.001.0001> p. 2.

⁶⁶ Tse, Interview.

agreed upon by authors and readers collectively: that in constructing a narrative an author makes utterances, intending that the reader imaginatively engage with them.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, this intention is reliant on the audience to decode a text in accordance with the intention of the writer. Hall's theory proves that this event is not a shared event between the writer and the audience, but is instead reliant on the position, the education, and the socio-cultural context of the audience. With this in mind, I argue that an author drawing on historical source material must not rely on the audience to understand any creative liberties taken but to treat such material as non-fiction. Journalism and non-fiction, even creative non-fiction, are bound by a purpose to reveal some sort of truth, and the relationship between the author and the audience is one of trust in the author's dedication to the facts. If an author has deliberately sought to restructure a narrative, whether as a poem, biography, or novel, they have altered a truth and must consider the ethical effects that this will have. These effects apply not only to the voice that the author has undertaken to reflect or pay homage to, but to the audience's understanding of the details of the source event and related concepts.

⁶⁷ Stock, p. 8.

Chapter 2

My focus is on the ethical treatment of a story within the poetry genre; however I must acknowledge further the events and journalistic reports that authors draw from to create their own retellings. Non-fiction and journalism sources worldwide are bound by ethical guidelines; closer to home, the behaviour of the New Zealand press has been directed by codes and standards for well over a century.⁶⁸ Common principles are taken from ethical codes in other countries: as stated in the New Zealand Law Commission on news media's rights and responsibilities, foremost among these was a "universal belief in the principle of accuracy, with its attendant principles of error correction and right of reply".⁶⁹ Additionally, the 'Statement of Principles' of the New Zealand Media Council comments directly on making clear the distinction between factual information and opinion of the writer,⁷⁰ while the E tū Union Code of Ethics requires journalists to interpret the news with "scrupulous honesty", disclosing all essential facts without distortion or improper emphasis.⁷¹ It is worth noting here the language chosen by these codes: neither directly represses the inclusion of bias within New Zealand journalism, but instead focuses on providing balance, accepting that opinion and personal bias is inevitable when *interpreting*, not writing, the news. Presenting a balanced account requires a journalist to explore issues in an uncommitted way, remaining detached from the story as a whole in order to write with objectivity.⁷² A journalist writing with objectivity must remain impartial and distanced, with the single aim of gathering information for an audience while

⁶⁸ New Zealand Law Commission, 'Chapter 2: The News Media's rights and responsibilities', *Law Commission Te Aka Matua o te Ture* (2013) <<http://r128.publications.lawcom.govt.nz/Chapter+2+-+The+News+Medias+rights+and+responsibilities/News+Media+responsibilities>> [accessed 13 May 2020]

⁶⁹ Ibid., para. 5.

⁷⁰ New Zealand Media Council, 'Statement of Principles', *New Zealand Media Council* (2020) <<https://www.mediacouncil.org.nz/principles>> [accessed 13 May 2020]

⁷¹ E tū, 'Journalist Code of Ethics', *E tū* (n.d.) <<https://etu.nz/journalist-code-of-ethics/>> [accessed 24 June 2019]

⁷² John Wilson, *Understanding Journalism: A Guide to Issues* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 45.

“cloaked in a garb of neutrality”.⁷³ However, just as Hall has explored the subjectivity of communication, we must also consider that each newspaper article or broadcast in journalism has been encoded with a specific bias, and therefore that total objectivity is unattainable due to the fallibility of human judgement.⁷⁴ We should also be aware that the rise of non-traditional mediums of journalism has led to an increase in acceptance of subjectivity. The current media landscape from which contemporary poets may draw source material includes forms of online reporting that are more participatory mediums and are at odds with the traditional “paradigm of objectivity”.⁷⁵ Phillipa Chong brings to light recent studies that investigate how subjectivity can co-exist with and complement various forms of journalism. What these studies show is that infusing journalism with emotional bias and subjectivity can enhance the resulting texts, in that readers are more likely to engage with the content and information communicated.⁷⁶ Karin Wahl-Jorgenson, a professor at Cardiff University whose research focuses on the relationship between citizenship, media and emotion, offers a particularly significant example of the use of subjectivity in Pulitzer Prize-winning journalism. Her studies into the subject have found that these “highly legitimated journalistic pieces”,⁷⁷ as described by Chong, frequently use emotion and bias to create more compelling articles. Wahl-Jorgenson claims that subjectivity in such articles leads to better journalism. Not only does the inclusion of emotional bias *not* challenge the objectivity of any story produced, but it can also be used to enhance the legitimacy of the journalist; the audience gets to know them while reading. Good journalism requires a constant evolution of narrative styles and reporting in a “dynamic and fluid manner”.⁷⁸ She argues that

⁷³ Karin Wahl-Jorgenson, ‘Subjectivity and Story-telling in Journalism’, *Journalism Studies*, 14.3 (2013), 305-320 <doi:10.1080/1461670X.2012.713738> p. 305.

⁷⁴ Wilson, p. 43.

⁷⁵ Phillipa Chong, ‘Valuing Subjectivity in Journalism: Bias, Emotions, and Self-interest as Tools in Arts Reporting’, *Journalism*, 20.3 (2019), 427–443 <doi:10.1177/1464884917722453> p. 428.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 429.

⁷⁷ Chong., p. 429.

⁷⁸ Wahl-Jorgenson, p. 317.

“subjectivity is now a deeply embedded tool of the journalistic profession”.⁷⁹ Alternatively, Mervi Pantti suggests that while subjectivity and bias are undeniably increasing in journalistic practice, they are problematic and lead to the “commercialization or tabloidization” of journalism. As a result subjectivity and bias represent a decline in ‘quality’ journalism, and are at odds with it.⁸⁰

The concept of bias itself is complex, but McQuail suggests four classifications to break it down. They are: partisan, propaganda, unwitting and ideological.⁸¹ I include these four descriptions now to provide a well-rounded perspective and to demonstrate the ease with which bias can make itself known in a text:

The first is explicit support for a particular position and the second more implicit – apparent only to those who are sensitive to the value-laden nature of the comment, descriptions and attitudes in the reporting. Unwitting bias is forced on journalists by the physical constraints of their craft: there is only so much room in a newspaper or time in a bulletin, while McQuail’s fourth category, ideological bias, may not even be apparent to those who produce it, because it is rooted in their own preconceptions and attitudes, values and beliefs, which they rarely, if ever, question spontaneously.⁸²

While partisan and propaganda biases are used deliberately when writing an article and unwitting bias can arise during the editing process, it is ideological bias that poses the biggest risk to the accuracy and balance of the news. Chong also provides a definition of bias, stating that it “refers to prejudices or inferences based on individual assumptions rather than the

⁷⁹ Wahl-Jorgenson, p. 317.

⁸⁰ Mervi Pantti, ‘The Value of Emotion: An Examination of Television Journalists’ Notions on Emotionality’, *European Journal of Communication*, 25.2 (2010), 168-181 <doi:10.1177/0267323110363653> p. 169.

⁸¹ Guy Starkey, *Balance and Bias in Journalism: Representation, Regulation and Democracy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. xvi.

⁸² Starkey, p. xvi.

‘reality’ of a situation”.⁸³ She ends her definition by arguing that, in its most problematic form, bias can lead to distortions in the truth of an event if a journalist uses their respective background as a lens through which to make sense of and report on the facts. We must consider, for instance, that if a journalist covering the story of Neil Roberts had a son at home of a similar age, he may subconsciously focus on the youth of Roberts. Further to that, if Detective Senior Sergeant Rob Butler, who was in charge of the investigation, had a child of a similar age who was beginning to question society and technology as Roberts himself had done, what ideological bias may have been subconsciously inserted into the quotes provided to the press? Indeed, in the poem ‘By way of explanation’, Beutrais has included a quote from Butler that demonstrates how his personal relationships have influenced his reaction:

Why people turn to that I don’t know,
but from experience I know that young people
sometimes can’t keep pace with the changes in society
and become very vulnerable to persuasion.⁸⁴

Tuchman proposes that “the newsmen view quotations of other people’s opinions as a form of supporting evidence” and that by interjecting someone else’s opinion in their article, “they believe they are removing themselves from participation in the story”.⁸⁵ In this scenario, the journalist who recorded this quotation may have sought objectivity but instead saturated his story with the opinion of the Detective Senior Sergeant. Alternatively, either man may have been conscious of potential bias and altered the truth in an effort to remove it. This

⁸³ Chong, p. 430. While Chong’s definition of bias is all-encompassing, the use of words such as prejudices, inferences and assumptions are in line with Starkey’s definition of ideological bias, as named by McQuail.

⁸⁴ Beutrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 35.

⁸⁵ Gaye Tuchman, ‘Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen’s Notions of Objectivity’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 77.4 (1972), 660-679 <www.jstor.org/stable/2776752> [accessed 23 May 2020] (p. 668)

demonstration of the presence *or absence* of bias is problematic, as one person's balance may be another person's bias; "what may seem to one person to be objective may be considered highly subjective by the other".⁸⁶ This becomes more of an issue as a story passes through the channels, moving from one bias to another as sources are compiled, articles written, edited, and physically altered to fit within the confines of a newspaper column. To turn a whisper of a story into a complete article requires multiple perspectives, and the reality is that each perspective will not share the same ideological bias as the others, due to each individual's socio-economic context. As Hall explored, these contexts are made personal by experiences and an individual's workplace, financial or educational situation. A journalist starting out in the industry and eager to break a story may have a different take on journalism practice to a more seasoned editor, or a sub-editor who does not know anything about a story beyond what they read on paper:

Picked up first by a seasoned freelance from a whisper, adapted knowingly after a call to police headquarters miles away, further embellished when rendered into journalese as the story is filed to an agency, snappily re-written before it gets on the agency wires, remodelled once more by a newsroom sub-editor, and then improved by a judicious word massage here and there from a more senior editor before it reaches the trusting public as a true record of what happened. By then the merchants of truth have delivered a reasonable approximation or, for all they know, a gross distortion.⁸⁷

In this process, the multiple perspectives are given the ability to introduce a new issue: portrayal of the action and characters involved. Mainstream media has historically included facts that are relevant to the news story or provide interest, and excluded key information that may alter the

⁸⁶ Starkey, p. xvii.

⁸⁷ Wilson, p. 52.

public's perception and understanding of the event.⁸⁸ Starkey states that every media report or article is a construct, "formed from elements chosen in whole or in part to offer those audiences an insight into a 'reality'".⁸⁹ This has been a common way to navigate limitations around the physical space an article may take, or to capture and retain the interest of the audience. Journalists, therefore, may shorten a character's description through the use of clichés and stereotypes. They may create discrimination on the grounds of gender, race, sexual preference, religious belief, marital status, or physical or mental disability; and may create dishonest reconstructions of events that then make their way to the public through the media and further poetic retellings.⁹⁰ Constructing a reality means that wholly accurate representations are unlikely to be found in mainstream media, and "even if unintentional, representing 'reality' within the time and resource constraints upon all media can introduce distortions that obfuscate more than they illuminate".⁹¹ Indeed, Wahl-Jorgenson encourages us to view the typical journalist as a storyteller more than as an objective voice:

The very idea that the journalist tells a story by reordering and reshaping events, facts and information implies a far greater moral and ideological involvement on the part of the story-teller than that embedded in the figure of the objective journalist.⁹²

The journalist has now moved beyond simply being a conduit for information, as they actively reorder and reshape reality as we read it.

Drawing on dishonest source material can have a negative impact on these contemporary texts, yet poets have always drawn on news reports for the foundation of their

⁸⁸ Wilson, p. 58.

⁸⁹ Starkey, p. 1.

⁹⁰ Wilson, p. 59

⁹¹ Starkey, p. 1.

⁹² Wahl-Jorgenson, p. 308.

storytelling.⁹³ In conversation with Tse and Beutrais, each cited reading press articles as key sources during their research process; indeed, Beutrais has used newspaper clippings as the basis for multiple found poems in her collections. ‘By way of explanation’ in *Dear Neil Roberts* is composed entirely of quotations by Detective Senior Sergeant Rob Butler. The words of Janis Freegard, another New Zealand poet, and Sam Buchanan, a New Zealand anarchist, feature in the poetic description of the character of Roberts, ‘Man’. Beutrais juxtaposes the lyricism of poetry with the blunt language of other people’s words. What she may not have considered is that her juxtaposition of voices has also created an inaccurate reality, combining pre-existing biases with her own.

While journalists structure a story around selected facts, we should also consider how a poet may begin writing with a specific theme or concept in mind, and how this may affect the sources of information that they encounter during the initial research process. My aim in this thesis is to delve deep into the backstory of a poetry collection and convince my own readers to consider ethics and the factual voice in their own writing going forward. While I have aimed to represent differing perspectives on the topic of bias and ethics, and research opposing voices with regard to my chosen topic, I cannot say with complete certainty that there was not a pre-determined plan behind this. Similarly, neither Tse nor Beutrais can say the same. Indeed, Tse says of his collection:

All these things, wondering what sort of person Joe Kum Yung was and what brought him to New Zealand in the first place, they were also things that I was thinking about, because the other part of my manuscript for my Masters was writing about my great-grandfather and how he came to be in New Zealand [...] Joe Kum Yung’s story was almost a ‘*well this could have happened*’. It was that, ‘what if that had happened to

⁹³ Elizabeth F. Gray, ‘Journalism and Poetry in the Nineteenth Century’, *Journalism Studies*, 18.7 (2015), 807-825 <doi:10.1080/1461670X.2015.1090884> (p. 808)

my family, where would we be today and what sort of mark would we be carrying if that was part of our own family history?’⁹⁴

Starkey is speaking about constructed realities in the media when he states that audiences to differing reports may have unquestioningly believed the report they were reading to be true, while someone who heard both accounts “would have been given reason to doubt the truth of one of them, while being quite unable to establish from the broadcasts alone which was correct”.⁹⁵ However, this is also a widely applicable view to the research and writing process when incorporating historical material. As my chosen authors’ audiences may be driven to further research on the events, as I have been, they may find differing reports due to an inclusion of multiple biases. Likewise, Tse and Beutrais have had to determine for themselves which of their selected reports were the most truthful and accurate representations of their respective events. I shall now compare some of the reports that were available to Tse and Beutrais with the poems in their respective collections, in order to demonstrate the value of accuracy to both journalism and a potential code of ethics for New Zealand historical fiction.

How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes

There must always be
a first victim.

Maybe not the very first
but the one that shocks.

⁹⁴ Tse, Interview.

⁹⁵ Starkey, p. 1.

The one that says: *hey, look*.

The one we can't let go.⁹⁶

It was a single newspaper article published for the centenary of the murder of Joe Kum Yung that sent Tse looking for more information around the story, and led to a series of poems that eventually became the collection *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes*.

On the 24th of September 1905, a Sunday, “a Chinaman was murdered... under what at present appear very wanton circumstances,” states a *Waikato Times* article.⁹⁷ This is a particularly striking introduction to one of many reports; the inclusion of the word ‘wanton’ (in the sense of deliberate and unprovoked)⁹⁸ highlights the shock of the event not only for the Chinese community but for New Zealand collectively. It is interesting to note that this use of ‘wanton’ seems to be a singular occurrence, but the idea of the murder being a calculated and highly considered event made a lasting impression on Tse; he admits to being shocked that “Lionel Terry deliberately went to Haining Street to find a Chinese person to shoot, and kill, to make a point, to prove a point,” and *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes* is a reaction to that.⁹⁹ This idea is further established in journalists’ responses of the era, and in articles published in the days following the event, when the Chinese and European communities around the country were still absorbing the shock, no matter their beliefs.

⁹⁶ Tse, p. 21. All poems, or sections of poems, from Tse that appear in this thesis are formatted as they appear in *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes*.

⁹⁷ ‘Chinaman Murdered’, *Waikato Times*, 25 September 1905 in Papers Past
<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/WT19050925.2.20>> [accessed 13 November 2019].

⁹⁸ Angus Stevenson, *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), Oxford Reference Online <<https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/>> [accessed 24 May 2020].

⁹⁹ Tse, Interview.

The *Wairarapa Daily Times* suggests that Joe Kum Yung had been visiting a neighbour for some peanuts. The “old fellow”¹⁰⁰ was on his way back to his own residence on Haining Street, and was almost underneath a street light when “another man was observed on the same footpath by a second Chinaman on the opposite side of the road”.¹⁰¹ The witness heard the first gunshot, and saw the second shot fired, just before Joe fell to the ground. The *Evening Post* provides a little more detail: “The man who was seen to fire the shot walked quickly out of Haining-street into Taranaki-street, thence to Ingestre-street, and here the eyewitness (another Chinaman) lost sight of him”.¹⁰² I argue that the inclusion of the race of the eyewitness to both reports lend the articles an unnecessary bias. Instead, the inclusion serves to portray the eyewitness as unreliable and therefore untrustworthy in the case against Terry, whom the *Evening Post* also describes as “a tall man... recently arrived in Wellington and understood to be well connected at Home” with “views concerning aliens”.¹⁰³ Indeed, the subheadings of this report describe him as “a preacher of the alien evil”,¹⁰⁴ connotations that explicitly encode a white supremacist viewpoint into the message. In labelling the article as such, the journalist responsible is thereby making his own views and the views of his publication on the subject clear to its readership, and encouraging the audience to think a certain way about the crime, and about Joe and the Chinese community. The publication’s readers are asked to judge Terry as guilty of murder, as these facts are irrefutable, but not guilty of senseless violence. In comparison, Tse takes the opposite view and expresses:

¹⁰⁰ ‘A Wellington Tragedy’, *Wairarapa Daily Times*, 25 September 1905 in Papers Past
 <<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/WDT19050925.2.23.2>> [accessed 13 November 2019].

¹⁰¹ ‘Murder in Wellington’, *Manawatu Herald*, 26 September 1905 in Papers Past
 <<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/MH19050926.2.17>> [accessed 13 November 2019]

¹⁰² ‘Street Murder in Wellington’, *Evening Post*, 25 September 1905 in Papers Past
 <<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19050925.2.54>> [accessed 13 November 2019]

¹⁰³ ‘Street Murder in Wellington’, para. 6.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, para 4.

1905: this is the end. The night opens
to a scene of death –

gun
blood
peanut shells
a knotted walking stick
and
one quiet body.

Two guilty feet
head in an unknown direction.¹⁰⁵

Describing Terry as ‘two guilty feet’ serves to remind the reader that there is no doubt about the who in this story. Tse is writing with hindsight, more than a century after the event, and therefore to label Terry as guilty is to state a fact, albeit in a way that only emphasises Terry’s culpability. However, just as the *Evening Post* journalist labels Terry an evangelist for white supremacy in New Zealand through the use of words such as ‘preacher’, Tse’s use of details such as the walking stick, peanut shells and the ‘quiet body’ emphasise Joe’s age, helplessness and humanity, making the call to his readers to find Terry guilty that much stronger.

The immediate reaction of the Chinese community to the gunshots provides a noteworthy example of truth and bias in journalism before they are translated into the poetry of Tse. The *Wairarapa Times*, commenting on the moments directly following the murder, states that “doors were thrown open, and windows were flung up in all directions, and scurrying aliens sped to the place from whence the shots had been heard”.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, the *Evening Post*,

¹⁰⁵ Tse, p. 22.

¹⁰⁶ ‘Murder in Wellington’, para. 3.

a Wellington publication, describes the shots as bringing “sudden life and excitement to that queer Mongolian neighbourhood, not unused though it be to deeds of violence”.¹⁰⁷ Nearly 40 years later, a report by MacClure in a 1941 issue of the *Auckland Star* reads: “In two ticks every fantan and pakapoo player in Haining Street knew Joe ‘Kum Yung had been murdered’”.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, the *Manawatu Times* reports on the subject of both death and the Chinese community:

A motly crowd of aliens suddenly gathered about the scene of the murder. Pak a-poo [sic] and fan-tan devotees left for a few hurried moments the reeking atmosphere of their gambling dens, that they might be present at this paying-out in the game of Death. Men, women and children all clambered eagerly about, while all around the horrid babel of vulgar animal curiosity hummed its insolent burden. So eager was the crowd for the keynote of it all that it seemed that the crack of the revolver and the hurried rush of Death had awakened within their sordid souls a cruel desire which had lain dormant all too long.¹⁰⁹

Interestingly the majority of these articles, where bias against the Chinese community is prominent, employ the emotive and descriptive language that is used in creative writing. These examples portray the Chinese community as being drawn to violence; however, research undertaken into the attitudes of East Asians towards death suggest that they enter into ‘religiocultural distress’ when faced with death in another country.¹¹⁰ Yick and Gupta conducted multiple focus groups with Chinese participants to discover more about the attitudes

¹⁰⁷ ‘Street Murder in Wellington’, para. 10.

¹⁰⁸ MacClure, ‘The Odd Angle’, *Auckland Star*, 21 October 1941 in Papers Past
<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/AS19411021.2.37> [accessed 13 November 2019]

¹⁰⁹ ‘A Chinese Victim’, *Manawatu Times*, 26 September 1905 in Papers Past
<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/MT19050926.2.7.1> [accessed 13 November 2019]

¹¹⁰ Sok K Lee, ‘East Asian Attitudes toward Death – A Search for the Ways to Help East Asian Elderly Dying in Contemporary America’, *The Permanente Journal*, 13.3 (2009), 55-60 <doi:10.7812/tpp/08-068> (p. 55)

of Chinese and Chinese-Americans towards death and dying. Findings from these groups uncover a recurring theme of death as taboo, noting that talking about or “ventilating grief”¹¹¹ is not common practice, and that controlling emotion is vital for proper behaviour. This stems from the cultural values that emphasise privacy and because of these values the Chinese do not share information with outsiders.¹¹² Additionally, the Chinese culture associates death with bad luck and consequently they will not discuss death for fear of invoking this. If they are to talk about it, they will do so in an indirect way.¹¹³ Tse affirms this by stating that:

There was something about this story that the Chinese community just did not want to acknowledge. Whether or not there was an inability to record the Chinese experience back then, I don’t know if they would have put down on paper what they would have felt, or the community response [...] All I know is that, based on talking to other people, no-one wanted to talk about it. It was this awful thing that happened to the community and it’s the past.¹¹⁴

This contrasts with news articles published about the death in the months following, including reports detailing shots fired and seeing “a man fall”¹¹⁵ – a common description for the murder across multiple publications – and details of the fatal wound itself. These range from “shot through the back of the head”¹¹⁶ to:

¹¹¹ Alice G Yick and Rashmi Gupta, ‘Chinese Cultural Dimensions of Death, Dying, and Bereavement: Focus Group Findings’, *Journal of Cultural Diversity*, 9.2 (2002), 32-42 <<https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/docview/219361908>> [accessed 29 May 2020] (p. 39)

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹¹⁴ Tse, Interview.

¹¹⁵ ‘The Inquest’, *Evening Post*, 26 September 1905 in Papers Past <<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19050926.2.52>> [accessed 13 November 2019]

¹¹⁶ ‘Street Murder in Wellington’, para. 5.

a bullet (produced) was found immediately outside the bone underneath the temple on the left side, the opening of the wound being on the right side of the head, at the back of the ear. There was considerable hemorrhage [sic] on the brain.¹¹⁷

Such vivid descriptions contrast with the findings of Yick and Gupta's study, suggesting accuracy in reporting but an indelicacy toward and potential bias against Chinese culture. Interestingly, Tse's phrasing leans more toward the Western view of Chinese as being drawn to violence and scandal, and he begins his collection with the following passage in the voice of Joe:

No one asked me to speak, nor took the time to fill a moment with my presence. We cannot hide from ourselves in the dark. I crouch down in the damp void and listen as they pass words about me between themselves like borrowed scandal. The loudest, hungriest voices drown out all reason.¹¹⁸

Comparably, his poem '*(Chorus)*' echoes the frantic, clamouring energy of the Chinese community:

and slip undetected through the folds of constant babble?
That is the panic of man – a chorus of voices
plummeting in minor keys towards a vanishing point.
Anyone willing to speak is hindered by their first tongue.
The rain stinks of death. Where he fell is a battle scar.
Better him than us.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ 'The Inquest', para. 3.

¹¹⁸ Tse, p. 1.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 29.

Tse's language suggests that he is reacting to mentions in news reports of the violence and scandal in the Chinese quarter, which he read and decoded during his research process. Furthermore, this theme of conversation versus silence, or life versus death, is carried throughout the collection. In doing so, Tse applies the Chinese views on death and familial issues, as explored by Yick and Gupta, in a way that adheres to Chinese culture. However, the creative language and techniques employed make us as readers question how much of the truth Tse adheres to, as he seems to present a Western perspective in treating the collective Chinese community as a loud chorus.

Yick and Gupta suggest that because openly discussing grief is not typical in Chinese culture, the rituals associated with death are mechanisms for grieving. Additionally, these rituals are a way to "preserve the Chinese culture in their new homelands"¹²⁰ and are performed as acts of filial piety. These rites and rituals by a son of the family name are one of the "most vital obligations" a child can perform.¹²¹ Furthermore, the Chinese believe that the relationship between the dead and the living is continuous, as the late family member is alive in the afterlife. If the rituals are not performed correctly and the family member not given the proper respect in burial, a "hungry ghost" will return with bad luck and misfortune.¹²² While we discover information about Joe in later news reports, details of his wife and family back in China are rare and leave a vast gap in the retelling of events, as well as in the story from the Chinese perspective. With this in mind, not only was Joe a man of misfortune who happened to be shot by Terry in a foreign country, he had neither wife nor son present to complete the rituals which would have passed his soul on to the afterlife. This we know from newspaper reports of Joe, who describe him as an elderly man alone in New Zealand and dependent on his community, and Tse's own interpretation of the relationship between Joe and his wife:

¹²⁰ Yick and Gupta, p. 39.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 35.

¹²² Ibid., pp. 34-35.

Your wife in Canton –

you carry her in your bones...

She probably moved on

you tell yourself –

a defeated man's consolation –

like so many other left-behind wives

with hearts retreating

whose husbands broke bones

and endured loaded looks to

provide them with happiness.¹²³

Just as the Western journalists writing about the murder are insensitive to the beliefs and attitudes of the Chinese community, they also fail to recognise the importance of the proper rituals. Instead, they skip over this section of the story in order to focus on the trial and incarceration of Terry, a much more likeable figure to their readers and therefore a more shocking subject. However, Tse's research uncovered a brief paragraph written in October of 1905, detailing that "the Chinese friends of Joe Kum Yung [...] have shipped the body of the deceased home to China in order that the usual religious rites may be celebrated."¹²⁴ Tse reflects this as he writes:

¹²³ Tse, p. 5. This interpretation is additional to the facts from Tse's research, as no information is ever provided on Joe Kum Yung's wife by newspaper articles. We do not know whether she was still alive in Canton at the time of the murder, and only have this poem from Tse's collection to inspire hope as to the end of Joe's life and his journey home to China.

¹²⁴ 'By the Way', *Mataura Ensign*, 28 October 1905 in Papers Past
<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/ME19051028.2.18>> [accessed 13 November 2019]

Your fellow
 countrymen would care for your bones
 and oversee the finalities –
 perform the proper rituals
 chant the proper words.¹²⁵

Additionally, the poem ‘(*All together now*)’ implies that these funeral rites were conducted in Canton:

In a church–The edge of an unknown village–This time
 we make do with one tongue.¹²⁶

However, it must be reiterated that the constructed reality of Joe’s life by New Zealand media ended with that final, brief report on the journey of his body home to China. We cannot be sure that he ever made it home, let alone that his family survived to bury him with the proper funeral rites. Therefore, in a similar way to Tse’s tangent about Joe and Terry as lovers, these passages are subjective and almost wishful re-imaginings of the story, rather than factual details about the death and burial of Joe. However, Tse skilfully reminds his readers of the Chinese attitude towards death and murder:

So they wrap up
 his shell and ship him
 to Hong Kong, where
 out of the way he becomes
 a faraway reminder.

¹²⁵ Tse, p. 6.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 30.

Distance will carry
 his secrets and take the weight
 of his life off their shoulders.
 He won't haunt their conscience
 or ignite their doubts
 with his ghost-hold.¹²⁷

Tse uses the crime, and the limited information he was able to source from newspaper reports, as a starting point from which to extrapolate the themes of Chinese death, grief, ritual and the afterlife in order to poetically lay Joe Kum Yung to rest. This has been aided by his personal experience with Chinese ritual at his grandmother's funeral, the first time as an adult that he was present at such an event and understood what each ritual symbolised:

People were explaining to me, 'we're doing this because of this' and 'this because of this', so it really helped me to understand it a lot more. For me, from an identity point of view, it helped me to understand my own culture quite a lot.¹²⁸

The recurring mention of joss¹²⁹ is an example of how Tse's own experience has influenced the details of the story from a modern perspective. We are not privy to any information on the funeral of Joe, therefore the inclusion of such a detail, while common at Chinese funerals, is arguably a form of subjective storytelling derived from Tse's experience. Through his poetry about Joe's funeral, Tse explores his own culture, and uses a combination of euphemistic language in line with his own heritage and the facts from his research to portray his

¹²⁷ Tse, p. 64.

¹²⁸ Tse, Interview.

¹²⁹ Joss can refer to either paper money, or joss paper, made from bamboo or rice. It is commonly burnt at Chinese funerals to give money to the soul of the deceased, so that they may be rich in the afterlife. Joss sticks, similar to incense, are also burnt while the family bow to the deceased, in deference to the ancestors. Joss is mentioned in Tse, p. 9., p. 40., and p. 60.

understanding of the story. We become reliant on these additional details from Tse's background to complete the narrative:

Going through the grieving process for her really made me understand personally what needed to happen for Joe Kum Yung. He didn't have that family here to do that for him, so in a strange way that really personal thing I was going through became the final piece of the puzzle. From that angle I could finally flesh out the rest of it and finish the poems, and tell the story as a whole.¹³⁰

Tse's research process focused on reading newspaper clippings, supplemented by superficial information from publications on New Zealand history.¹³¹ As I drew on these same sources in my own research process, we can assume that we are both writing with a similar level of knowledge and understanding about the details of the murder and Joe Kum Yung's life. As the vivid facts are few and far between, Tse has turned to characterisation in order to present a rounded narrative and fill the gaps within the story. This has also aided him in moving the focus away from the murder itself and allowing Joe's voice to speak, as was his original intention for the collection.¹³² Journalists writing about the event are commonly sympathetic to the plight of Joe, understanding that there was "no cause for animosity"¹³³ against the man, chosen by Terry "because he looked old and decrepit, and as if life was a burden to him".¹³⁴ The *Waikato Times* states:

Yung was nearly 70, and had been in the colony from 25 to 30 years, but had lived in Wellington only six months. He was a semi-invalid, having broken his leg and

¹³⁰ Tse, Interview.

¹³¹ Tse, Interview.

¹³² Tse, Interview.

¹³³ 'Chinaman Murdered', para. 1.

¹³⁴ 'The Wellington Murder', *Colonist*, 27 September 1905 in Papers Past
<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/TC19050927.2.18.1>> [accessed 13 November 2019]

suffered other injuries while mining in Westland. His fellow-countrymen were subscribing to send him back to China. He was practically penniless; and was not known to have had a quarrel with anyone.¹³⁵

A report in the *Evening Post* elaborates:

Joe Kum Yung was, it seems, an old man whom Fortune had not smiled on. A miner on the West Coast, and twenty-five years' resident in the colony, he met with an accident, causing permanent injuries to his leg of a more or less disabling character. Unable to follow a mining avocation, and having failed in an attempt to do what was required of him as a raiser of vegetables in Palmerston North, he was dependent altogether on the bounty of his fellow-countrymen, and they were subscribing to send him back to China.¹³⁶

Such descriptions typically emphasise his age, either referring to him as “an old Celestial”¹³⁷ or similar, or referencing his estimated age and the length of time he had been in the colony. Furthermore, in an *Evening Post* article about the inquest, the journalist writes that Dr Ewart, a medical officer at the hospital where Joe was taken, “gave evidence regarding the condition of Joe Kum Yung when the Chinaman was brought into the institution”,¹³⁸ noting that he deemed Joe's injuries fatal. This testimony was corroborated by Dr Martin, who attended to Joe at the scene of the crime. However, the journalist reports that the Coroner decided to have a full post mortem conducted, suggesting that perhaps his age may have been a factor in the cause of death. The request for the post mortem seems unnecessary and implies a darker reason

¹³⁵ ‘Chinaman Murdered’, para. 1. Note the use of the name Yung; while the journalist may have thought they were referring to Joe by his last name, the use of Yung in this context does demonstrate a Western insensitivity toward Chinese culture.

¹³⁶ ‘Street Murder in Wellington’, para. 4.

¹³⁷ ‘A Chinese Victim’, para. 2.

¹³⁸ ‘The Inquest’, para. 3.

for further investigation. While this journalist may not be directly referencing Joe's age, it appears that his old age and disability may have affected the trial of Terry.

Tse has sought to reflect these details in his own poetry, but places his own emphasis on Joe Kum Yung as a simply unfortunate man. Without mention of his physical disabilities or age, Tse navigates the separation between the voice of Joe and articles where Joe's weaknesses are highlighted, creating a character whom we accept without question as the victim. This is arguably more in line with the traditional ethics of journalism, where journalists are instructed to "not place unnecessary emphasis on gender, race, sexual preference, religious belief, marital status or physical or mental disability".¹³⁹ Similarly, journalists are not to distort by "wrong or improper emphasis".¹⁴⁰ Indeed, mention of Joe's leg is only found once in the collection:

The accident – your leg crushed
 in the mine – such misery of bone.
 There was menace on the wind that day
 riding in to greet one unfortunate soul.
 The fates played their song its melody
 an echo in your lame limb.
 A man can only welcome so much miserable luck,
 courage eventually splintering
 under pressure¹⁴¹

Additionally, his age is referenced indirectly through specific dates, his walking stick and the writing techniques that Tse uses to replicate a feeling of heaviness. The inclusion of Joe's

¹³⁹ E tū, para 3.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., para 2.

¹⁴¹ Tse, p. 6.

disability and age by Tse only serves to heighten the motif of misfortune that surrounds him; phrases such as “for years I lit incense and prayed for my share of good fortune [...] my bad luck clung to me like a wandering ghost”¹⁴² and “I’ve held out for luck and fortune like a stony fool”¹⁴³ are prominent throughout the collection. Tse employs this motif as recognition of the events in Joe’s life which led to such a moment as the murder, and thereby indirectly informs his audience about the life of the Chinese community in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Newspaper reports at the time portray the Chinese quarter of Wellington as full of opium dens and gambling, demonstrating an obvious bias against the Chinese community, and further encouraging the idea that they were immoral and separate from the lawfully good white majority of New Zealand. They imply that the Chinese have invaded, facilitated by the common use of the term ‘alien’. However, armed with research and inside knowledge on the life of a Chinese immigrant—his grandfather had immigrated to New Zealand in the twentieth century—Tse repaints the picture that the New Zealand media first offered of life as an immigrant in the era of Joe Kum Yung. Instead of presenting the Chinese experience as violent and unprincipled, he reframes it as one of longing and instead offers his readers a comparison between life at home in China and the search for a better future in New Zealand. As we decipher the message encoded in the collection—that this future was not to be found for Joe and many other Chinese immigrants—we are privy to more personal details within the text that have stemmed from the intersection between Tse’s bias and his own family history.

The story of Joe Kum Yung cannot be told in full without the inclusion of Lionel Terry. While Tse drew on his own bias and experience in order to portray the voice and character of Joe, the opposite was the case with Terry, whose voice and characteristics saturate the story across a variety of mediums. This provides a strong bias for Terry and one Tse deliberately

¹⁴² Tse, p. 1.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

refuses to include in order to pay homage to Joe. However, in disregarding Terry, he is inadvertently including a strong personal bias against this figure. MacClure, writing with hindsight in 1941, provides a description of the character of Lionel Terry:

If, on the evening of September 24, 1905, you'd been in the vicinity of Taranaki Street (Wellington) you'd probably have bumped into a tall, immaculately-dressed, military-looking gentleman of aristocratic features. Had you spoken to him you may have discovered he was educated at Eton and Oxford, had been in the Royal Horse Guards (Blues), in Bulawayo during the Jameson Raid, in the Matabele War, knew Kruger and Cecil Rhodes intimately, had been a wide-world traveller, and ascended Mount Pelee in the island of Martinique, was a notable artist and an author, and that he was a mild-mannered man, gentle of speech with a soft, pleasant voice and a winning smile. Had you looked him up later at his hotel, you'd have found him deep in conversation with some members of Parliament. Physically, he was a perfect specimen of a man, over six feet in height, slim and well built, blue eyed, clean shaven and in perfect health [...] Had you asked him how he spent the early part of that Sunday evening he'd probably have told you the exact truth – he'd just murdered a man he'd never seen in his life before and knew nothing about. A charming fellow.¹⁴⁴

The creative way in which MacClure introduces us to Terry depicts him as an almost fictitious character, as these details bring to life a mild, accomplished man, with the slight flaw of having a penchant toward violence. However, in direct comparison with the portrayal of the Chinese community as being drawn to violence and crime, the inclusion of such specific details as where he served in the army, noted alongside his prestigious education, leans toward an almost

¹⁴⁴ MacClure, para. 2.

reverent description. Articles from the time emphasise his physical features and intelligence, encouraging readers to believe that he is a man who understands the world and that his cause is worthy of being followed. Indeed, many reference his pamphlet *The Shadow*, which he gave to the police when he turned himself in, along with the revolver he used to murder Joe. Some publications go so far as to include direct quotations from the pamphlet, encoding their bias into the article. Furthermore, the inclusion of the price of *The Shadow* encourages readers of the publication to purchase and acts as advertising for Terry's cause.

Comparatively, Tse's first introduction to Terry takes place fourteen pages into the collection. While his name is mentioned within the first few, this deliberately focuses the readers' attention on the voice of Joe, making it clear where Tse's own bias and judgement lies. This initial introduction summarises the character of Terry as described by MacClure but in only eight lines, referencing the grand titles the man held before arriving in New Zealand; his grand ideas; and the grand way the New Zealand public viewed him:

Lionel Terry –

Shepherd of the Nation

Army of One

and

Saint of Order¹⁴⁵

Tse's phrasing reflects journalists' use of the word 'preacher' in the *Evening Post*, which paint Terry as guiding the nation towards freedom from the Chinese and restoring order to the white majority. However, what is particularly striking about this poem is the final line, "tucks his pleasure into his boots".¹⁴⁶ The combination of the words 'tucks' and 'pleasure' implies a

¹⁴⁵ Tse, p. 14.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

sexual gratification of sorts, which becomes confronting when we realise that Tse is writing about the revolver used by Terry to murder Joe. The reasons behind Terry's background and involvement with armies, wars and raids around the world are brought into focus and the character of Terry is changed considerably in the eyes of Tse's readers. Tse's bias encourages us to read Terry as a sadistic and masochistic character – the moral opposite of the saviour that the New Zealand media at the time portrayed him to be. This bias is further reflected partway through the collection when Terry turns himself in. While media articles report on Terry's calm nature, undisturbed by the gossip around him and even discussing the sales of his pamphlet with a stockist before moving on to the police station, Tse uses this straightforwardness to highlight Terry's egotism:

And just like that
 the killer turns himself in.
 And just like that
 the shift in the air is a knife
 at their throats. The motive
 unstitches their arrangements
 and just like that
 history is forged under shadow
 by the most conceited voice.¹⁴⁷

This passage reflects the anger of Tse towards Terry's arrogance in claiming the story for himself when it should have belonged to the voice of Joe Kum Yung. Because of Terry's actions, one of the most important moments in the history of New Zealand Chinese immigrants is appropriated by white supremacy and forever tainted by Terry's ideologies on 'yellow peril'

¹⁴⁷ Tse, p. 34.

and ‘aliens’. Significantly, this is the last notable moment that Terry plays in Tse’s retelling. The rest of the collection refers to Terry through character studies such as the poem ‘(*In which the author interviews a Mr Terry*)’ where his documented claim regarding the Chinese, “I have worked alongside of them in many parts of the world and I know what they are”,¹⁴⁸ is explored:

And if not in our hand then we trust the nation’s future to a breed of licentious devils,
allowing their sins to wash upon us [...]

First they shake the very ground we walk upon; upset the stable nature of our pioneers
[...]

They shake the sky and demand shelter [...]

They shake their bodies as if swarmed with demons.¹⁴⁹

This is one final effort by Tse to understand Lionel Terry and to provide reasoning for the events of the collection to the audience, so that we may have full understanding of the characters of both Joe and Terry. However, we must bear in mind here that there are multiple other things Terry may have said in this hypothetical interview. In providing a character study of one particular aspect of Terry’s life – his violence and strong views against the Chinese – Tse may be putting words into his mouth.

Characterisation and stereotype are used heavily in newspaper reports and Tse’s poetry when referencing Joe Kum Yung and Lionel Terry, however, the Chinese community collectively creates the third main character in the story. Witnesses to the murder are described first and foremost by race, being either European or Chinese, and multiple witnesses within the Chinese community are neither mentioned by name or by title but are instead referred to as

¹⁴⁸ ‘A Chinese Victim’, para. 6.

¹⁴⁹ Tse, p. 39.

“the Chinaman”,¹⁵⁰ “Chinese friends of Joe Kum Yung”, his “fellow-countrymen”¹⁵¹ or even “the Celestial”.¹⁵² This emphasises Joe as the central ethnic character of the story, and ensures the rest of the Chinese community remains both nameless and faceless, as the white majority population would have seen them at the time. This idea is the focus of Tse’s poem ‘(*Good Law*)’, constructed from New Zealand twentieth century law regarding the immigration of Chinese to New Zealand:

They made special provisions by virtue to control restricted immigrants (that being the Chinese, and the Chinese alone). *The whole objective of the statute was to prevent people of the Chinese race from coming into the Dominion and engaging in industrial pursuits [...]*

That was our standing in 1905, our lives reduced to administrative shepherding¹⁵³

The repetitive use of racial terms by white twentieth-century journalists and lawmakers turns race into a scapegoat and acts as an excuse to avoid supplying other more personal details unless absolutely necessary. It creates distance between the Chinese community and the white majority of New Zealand. By contrast, while the relevant press articles are saturated with racial terms, Tse writes using the collective ‘we’ in homage to his own Cantonese-Chinese heritage. We know that Tse is writing to reclaim a bit of the story for Joe and to “centre him and give him a voice”,¹⁵⁴ therefore we must consider that Tse’s use of ‘we’ throughout the collection implies a personal bias. Indeed, Tse affirms that whenever he reads about hate crimes against

¹⁵⁰ ‘A Wellington Tragedy’, para. 4.

¹⁵¹ ‘Chinaman Murdered’, para. 1.

¹⁵² ‘Street murder in Wellington’, para. 3.

¹⁵³ Tse, p. 4.

¹⁵⁴ Tse, Interview.

the Chinese or other minorities, he responds in a way that reflects the question, “God, what if that were to happen to me?”¹⁵⁵

Dear Neil Roberts

Providing a different perspective on bias in poetic representations of New Zealand history, the portrayal of the attempted bombing of the Wanganui Computer¹⁵⁶ in *Dear Neil Roberts* combines Beautrais’ personal experience and primary sources. These sources include both media reports and personal communication with members of the punk-anarchy scene. However, Beautrais reveals that personal connections made her hesitant to conduct detailed interviews, stating: “I just felt like it wasn’t appropriate. If I’d been writing a piece of journalism it may have been different, but... I didn’t want to upset anyone for my own personal ends”.¹⁵⁷ Her reference to interviewing as part of journalism practice is interesting to note as she immediately separates poetry and creative writing from the more traditional forms of media, and implies that one genre presents a different version of a story than the other. Historically, we have placed more trust in traditional journalism. We consider it to enable “informed, reasoned, and rational participation” in audiences of media outlets, and to control the flow of information between authorities and citizens.¹⁵⁸ Ardèvol-Abreu and Gil de Zúñiga connect this gatekeeping to the trust of media audiences; we expect them to provide unbiased news stories in accordance with the ethical guidelines and principles.¹⁵⁹ By contrast, the “rise of the internet, online news technologies, social media tools and mobile applications” have

¹⁵⁵ Tse, Interview.

¹⁵⁶ I recognise that the contemporary name of the town has changed to Whanganui; however Beautrais uses the old spelling of Wanganui when discussing the Wanganui Computer Centre and the Wanganui Chronicle. As I seek to explore how accurately she represents the facts of the event, I too will use this spelling when relevant in my discussion.

¹⁵⁷ Beautrais, Interview.

¹⁵⁸ Alberto Ardèvol-Abreu and Homero Gil de Zúñiga, ‘Effects of Editorial Media Bias Perception and Media Trust on the Use of Traditional, Citizen, and Social Media News’, *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 94.3 (2016), 703-724 <doi:10.1177/1077699016654684> (p. 703)

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 704.

made it increasingly easy for the public to share information and opinions on a variety of subjects, without being held to the same ethical considerations as traditional media outlets.¹⁶⁰ However, as contemporary retellings of these events emerge in various other mediums, with a decline in media trust occurring simultaneously due to this citizen journalism, we look to other sources to gain the information we need. This is especially relevant for Beautrais' interpretation of the character of Neil Roberts and his actions. Roberts was an anarchist rebelling against coercive forms of hierarchy, and these conventional forms of media emphasise messaging that is controlled by authorities. It was members of the same community that Beautrais turned to for the information used to round out the narrative of *Dear Neil Roberts*, alongside other non-traditional sources such as social media pages. These were set up in Roberts' honour, and perpetuated with information about the bombing and subsequent occurrences in the scene.¹⁶¹

From these primary sources, with the addition of media reports from the time and academic papers written on the subject of anarchy in New Zealand, we know that in the early hours of 18 November 1982, a 22-year-old Roberts used "about 3 or 4 kilograms of gelignite, a number 6 electronic detonator, and a 6-volt Eveready battery bought for \$5.66 at 9:15pm"¹⁶² in an attempt to blow up Wairere House, the building that contained the Wanganui Computer. This computer was commissioned in 1976 as a central database on New Zealand citizens, hosted and operated by police and including information from the justice and land transport authorities. The detonation tore Roberts apart, killing him instantly, and his body was blasted along a 65-metre path after the explosion. He was identified only by a fingerprint,¹⁶³ and "in a gruesome detail, a piece of his breast bearing the tattooed inscription 'This punk won't see 23.

¹⁶⁰ Ardèvol-Abreu and Gil de Zúñiga, p. 704

¹⁶¹ Beautrais, Interview.

¹⁶² Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 57. While this section of the poem is broken across three lines, I have removed the traditional line breaks in an effort to demonstrate the poetic style of Beautrais within this collection and how she uses the traditional, straightforward language of journalism to retell the event of Neil Roberts and the Wanganui Computer.

¹⁶³ David Lomas, 'Cheerful Punk's Date with Death', *The Dominion*, 19 November 1982.

No future’ was found amongst the debris.”¹⁶⁴ Traditional media publications may sometimes include a photograph as a shorthand descriptor for the carnage; in doing so, they may create unwitting bias on behalf of the journalist, as the photographer himself would have his own perception of the event and what the included photograph should show. Alternatively, a reader may draw their own conclusions from a photograph and, if negative, transfer the blame for these opinions to the journalist as it is their name that appears on the article. By contrast, Beautrais has chosen to replicate this story completely in poetry and provide descriptions of her visual sources:

In an envelope are photos. One
is of chalk circles drawn on the asphalt,
labelled ‘Brain’ and ‘Cloth’.
Nothing in them but smears.¹⁶⁵

In representing her sources this way, Beautrais gives her readers insight into her own reactions to the information she is drawing on. By presenting us with such a description, rather than directly exposing us to the image, she is able to include ideological bias and control the flow of information, or the level of detail, that we are privy to. In doing so, Beautrais is limiting the reaction we are able to have to the story; we are invested in her own response instead of the event itself. Indeed, Beautrais provides context for this photo before the description by writing, “I open the box and read: / *When the wealthy fuck up, / the poor get to die for their mistakes*”.¹⁶⁶ Beautrais herself has “radical views” on politics and other left- and right-wing topics;¹⁶⁷ reading this phrase may have altered the way she looked at the photos, or the details she may

¹⁶⁴ Russell Campbell, ‘System Overload: Neil Roberts, Punk Anarchism and *The Maintenance of Silence*’, *Journal of New Zealand Studies*, NS 8 (2009), 85-96 <doi:10.26686/jnzs.v0i8.6> (p. 86)

¹⁶⁵ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 17.

¹⁶⁶ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 17. Italics are used as they appear within the poem, rather than for my own personal emphasis.

¹⁶⁷ Beautrais, Interview.

have focused on. This may have then changed the way she wrote about the image and therefore how we perceive this information. Similarly, in framing the description of the photograph with this phrase, we may also be affected in a certain way by these words. Information is filtered through our individual perspectives, which are in turn constructed by our socio-economic contexts; our own reaction to this wording will impact on our interpretation of what Beutrais is presenting us with. However, this provides a platform for Beutrais to supply deeper detail and to draw on her own interest in and experience of anarchy in New Zealand. Graffiti discovered by police, following the explosion, is a striking example of this. Roberts had spray painted 'WE HAVE MAINTAINED A SILENCE CLOSELY RESEMBLING STUPIDITY' on the wall of a nearby public toilet, accompanied by the anarchy-is-order symbol. While relevant media reports mention this graffiti but skip over the details, or choose to represent this insight into Roberts' character and motive in an image, Beutrais has used this information to reinforce Roberts' dedication to his cause. We are assured by the media and Roberts' friends that this was an intentional suicide, as *The Dominion* reports:

Mr Butler said it would never be known if Roberts meant to kill himself 'but the indications are, from what we have learned about him, that he did intend to kill himself – that he had become obsessed with committing this last, final act.

From what we have been told he did not seem to have any concern about his own life.'¹⁶⁸

Beutrais emphasises this aspect of the event to her readers in 'By way of explanation':

The indications are, from what we have learned about him,
that he did intend to kill himself –

¹⁶⁸ Lomas, para. 29.

that he had become obsessed with committing this last, final act.

He didn't want to hurt anybody, but wanted to emphasise his beliefs.¹⁶⁹

This quote is duplicated from *The Dominion*; however, it is the poetic context provided by Beutrais within the collection that reinforces Roberts' strength and resolution. Media reports state Roberts' intention using plain language, in what we can assume is an attempt to follow ethical guidelines, or use unwitting bias in the inclusion of imagery to conserve words. In comparison, poetry allows Beutrais the freedom to consider Roberts' intentions and resolution through her own lens, which we see as she applies this lens to the imagery of the media: "The text strikes me as having been written with a steady hand".¹⁷⁰

New Zealand poet Maria McMillan suggests, in her speech for the launch of the collection, that we receive enough information to understand Roberts' actions were deliberate, but that the collection always points back to the death of a young man.¹⁷¹ Unlike Tse's efforts to avoid emphasis of age and disability in *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes*, Beutrais' collection is based on the premise of Roberts dying just weeks before Beutrais herself was born in the same city, and seeks to highlight these aspects. Beutrais introduces the collection by writing to Roberts, "Neil, you were six weeks dead / when I was born, the last hours / of 1982. Almost thirty years / have gone by since then".¹⁷² She goes on to say, "My second son will be born soon. / Therefore future. Therefore past", solidifying age, life and death as themes

¹⁶⁹ Beutrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, pp. 35-36. In the collection's notes Beutrais states: "'By way of explanation' is composed entirely of quotations by Detective Senior Sergeant Rob Butler, from newspaper articles of the time." This highlights the accuracy with which Beutrais has attempted to relay the facts with the addition of her own individual perspective, as this quote is an exact replica of the quote within *The Dominion*. In contrast, Tse has sought to filter the information from media sources through his own personal bias. These two methods of representing moments in New Zealand's history differ in how bias is included but both illustrate a change in information flow to the readers' of these contemporary poets.

¹⁷⁰ Beutrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 27.

¹⁷¹ Maria McMillan, 'Dear Neil Roberts Launch Speech', *These Rough Notes VUP News* (2014)
<<http://victoriauniversitypress.blogspot.com/2014/11/dear-neil-roberts-launch-speech.html>>
[accessed 4 March 2020]

¹⁷² Beutrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 13.

within her retelling of the story.¹⁷³ She writes about the death of Roberts with hindsight, while pregnant, reflecting on how she has changed over the past three decades. Age, life and death are also themes that have continually arisen from journalistic and creative responses to Roberts and the event itself. Those writing or speaking about Roberts comment often on his tattoo, a recurring motif in the media, and his desire to die young, which Beutrais acknowledges throughout *Dear Neil Roberts*:

A quiet young man...

He was scared of growing old.

His philosophy was that growing old was pointless...

He often talked about killing himself,

but the date kept changing so we didn't take him too seriously.

He told me he didn't think he would be alive in a year,

but I didn't really believe him.¹⁷⁴

Beutrais explores this desire further as she compares her life at the time of writing, with one young child and another on the way, to the life Roberts didn't have a chance to lead: "I wonder out loud, what it would be like / if you kept living the same life you lived at twenty-one".¹⁷⁵ While it is unclear whether she is talking about Roberts directly or about humanity in general, Beutrais is applying her personal growth and bias to the story, as she indirectly illustrates how her own future has altered since she was a young activist in her twenties. It is now due to her children and their future that she understands Roberts' motivators and his concern about the

¹⁷³ Beutrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 13.

¹⁷⁴ Beutrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, pp. 18-19. The poem 'Man' is composed entirely of quotes taken from newspaper articles and magazine articles that describe Roberts, whether from police, or people who had known Roberts, and from the writings of Janis Freegard and Sam Buchanan.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p 37.

direction that the world was heading in. However, rather than accept the event as the politically charged action that we understand it to be through Beautrais' perspective, the media at the time perpetrate the idea of the event as a male youth suicide. This is where the impact of the media and of Roberts' age are drawn into Beautrais' retelling; we read a message from the Whanganui coroner in 'Conclusions':

Although suicides are not generally described as such

in the media, the Whanganui coroner explains,

"I would hope this sad event is taken for what it is."¹⁷⁶

The poem 'Press' elaborates:

In powdery ink and stinking newsprint

you are pressed into a shape.

A young man of 22, apparently determined

not to become 23.

Less an anarchist

than a young man without hope.¹⁷⁷

Beautrais' personal history with activism and anarchism have contributed to the direction of the collection up to this point, yet her realization that this is a male youth suicide and Roberts' portrayal in the media as yet another statistic impacts on the way that she responds to the age of Roberts in this story.¹⁷⁸ While her focus remains on Roberts as a committed anarchist and the ripple effect his actions had on her own life, the collection is populated with male characters

¹⁷⁶ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 37.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁷⁸ Beautrais, Interview.

of various ages, representing the child that Roberts was at birth, the youth who had lost all hope in the future of society, and the man who never had a chance to see a different future.

Beautrais has attempted to relay the character of Roberts as accurately as possible through the words of those who were part of the event or who knew Roberts intimately; both ‘By way of explanation’ and ‘Man’ are composed entirely of found quotes. These quotes are taken from media reports at the time, and later newspaper articles, thereby keeping as close as possible to the factual voice of journalism and the ethical guidelines of accuracy and objectivity. In this case, any bias found within these two poems is inherited from the journalists themselves or implicated in the arrangement of the quotes by Beautrais.

The poem ‘By way of explanation’ offers a particularly clear example of how the words of Detective Senior Sergeant Butler and other sources have been stitched together by Beautrais to construct specific facts and a timeline of events that are true to her personal narrative. The piece itself offers her readers insight into Roberts via the bias and perspective of Butler, through such phrases as “it is possible the bomber had a very disturbed / and unnatural view”, and “he was one of those people whose human frailty / leads them to join a cult or sect”.¹⁷⁹ Beautrais’ readers are led to believe that Roberts’ was unstable, yet the inclusion of the note about her source for this poem is considered and changes how her readers perceive the information. We now know that Beautrais is not making these claims about Roberts directly, but is implicating Butler, changing our regard for the detective. The information we are receiving is filtered through not only the poet’s bias, but the biases of Butler himself, the journalists who included these quotations in their articles, and the editors and subeditors behind the relevant publications. While Butler may have simply reacted to the event on a personal level, and let this affect the statements he made to press following Roberts’ death, his opinions have been

¹⁷⁹ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 35.

carefully considered and used in order to communicate different narratives – in a similar way to the quotes and sources of information used to construct the narrative of this paper.

Interestingly, the poems in *Dear Neil Roberts* are not ordered chronologically; Beutrais weaves between narrator and subject throughout the collection. However, the voices of those who knew Roberts personally make an appearance before the words of Butler and the media; the effect is a clear demonstration of bias on Beutrais' part. Her readers explore Roberts' identity as a "gentle, calm and pretty intelligent" man with "an unusually large number of friends"¹⁸⁰ before they are required to judge his character based on the representations of the police and the media, and in ordering the poems as such Beutrais pushes forward this representation of Roberts as dominant. Additionally, we must remember that Hall's theory notes both the encoding and decoding processes of communication as affecting information; one reader of 'By way of explanation' may relate to Butler's perspective and view the event as the tragic death of a misguided youth whose character was weak enough that he was influenced by cultists. Comparatively, a reader who knew Roberts or who simply formed an understanding of Roberts from reading 'Man' may view Butler's language as defamatory. Beutrais has directed her readers to think a certain way about Roberts early in the work, which causes dissention when they view the words of Butler later in the collection.

Beutrais has made it clear that this collection is a personal reaction to the death of Roberts, staying present as the narrator in her interpretation of the facts. She reshapes the story of Roberts according to her own experiences, providing us with her personal perspective through which to view the event and the subsequent years:

[...] while there is a strong focus on Neil Roberts and the circumstances of his death, this is very much Airini's story told straight. Airini doesn't play with words, or mince

¹⁸⁰ Beutrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 18.

them. She doesn't invent an intimacy with events she wasn't part of, she doesn't make assumptions. She's just telling us her story as honestly and as well as she can.¹⁸¹

Indeed, and in comparison to Tse's style of writing in *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes*, Beutrais' poetic style is documentary and dedicated to honestly relaying the facts – but only as she understands them. This presents a Western way of thinking about death, and a lean toward the journalistic practice of gathering and reshaping information, rather than creatively interpreting. Tse has selected aspects of the story of Joe in order to present a collection tailored to the voice of his character, and as a result he looks at the event through the lens of his own bias and perspective. In comparison, Beutrais has not attempted to hide any aspect of the death of Roberts; rather, she presents the entire story in order to provide context for her own reaction and the bias that she openly brings to the collection. Indeed, she argues that “you can't approach any subject without bias because we bring our individual experiences, values and ideals to whatever we look at”.¹⁸² This is something she recognises as having embraced in *Dear Neil Roberts*:

That's the beauty of poetry as opposed to journalism; you might be attempting objectivity but in poetry you absolutely know. There are no requirements to be objective, you can be as objective as you like. The thing poetry can offer when writing about history is an alternative way in. You don't have to be concerned about representing all the viewpoints and balance in your portrayal of events. You can make stuff up; you can be very much in favour of a particular idea.¹⁸³

McMillan suggests that rather than being solely about Roberts, *Dear Neil Roberts* is about Beutrais' investigation into the life and death of Roberts and how it has affected her own

¹⁸¹ McMillan, para. 4.

¹⁸² Beutrais, Interview.

¹⁸³ Beutrais, Interview.

identity. We see what Beautrais sees, from the photographs of the media to Wairere House thirty years later, and she “lets us sit with her as she tries to figure out how it fits and doesn’t fit into her own life”.¹⁸⁴ Furthermore, she treats her poetry as a way to process not only the life of Roberts but the changes to society in the thirty year period between his death and the birth of the collection. It provides a new way of analysing the event and removes the constraints that are found in other mediums and genres¹⁸⁵ – from the creative boundaries of photography and film, as found in other representations, to the ethical guidelines that must be adhered to in journalistic reports. Beautrais is conscious of how much of her own story is revealed in the narrative, and has sought to place more emphasis on Roberts rather than herself in the story, affirming that during the editing process she cut out some of the personal and tangential material that related more to her own life.¹⁸⁶ The overall aim of the collection is to enable Beautrais to walk in the footsteps of history in order to connect with it and understand it:

In some ways it might be quite egocentric, but I think it’s a way of forging a connection with the past to walk around where things took place and to picture yourself in a different time and place.¹⁸⁷

Furthermore, Beautrais provides her readers with a full context of the time period through the poem ‘Time’, which is based on “newspaper headings, articles and advertisements from the *Wanganui Chronicle* and the *Wanganui Herald*, November 1982”.¹⁸⁸ However, in doing so, Beautrais is pressing upon her readers her own connection with history, which in turn limits their ability to forge their own. Though not overtly voiced to her readers, one of her main intentions in retelling the story of Roberts is to explore the presentation of history, and how

¹⁸⁴ McMillan, para. 10.

¹⁸⁵ Beautrais, Interview.

¹⁸⁶ Beautrais, Interview.

¹⁸⁷ Beautrais, Interview.

¹⁸⁸ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 60.

events such as Roberts' death fit into a national, political narrative. Beautrais is writing with the view that events are reported on and taught in contemporary settings if they fit with a specific narrative: "anything that is counter to that, so people protesting or some of the colonial history of New Zealand, doesn't get taught in the same way because it doesn't support the idea".¹⁸⁹ As a young man with previous convictions for possession of cannabis and obstruction of the police, and "a known protestor",¹⁹⁰ Roberts' character went against the national narrative that establishments such as police and the media seek to follow. Even Buchanan considers Roberts' choice of the Wanganui Computer to be a specific choice and a political target, informing Campbell:

There was no, right, I'm going to go out and take people with me, or the terrorist methodology of I am out to create fear. There was no attempt to create fear in the minds of any ordinary person. It was aimed at a specialist arm of the state.¹⁹¹

However, the punk-anarchy community failed to claim the act publicly, and as a result the New Zealand media at the time "characterised the bombing as the misguided gesture of a misfit".¹⁹² Articles instead focused on his age and the more negative aspects of his character, from his tramp-like appearance to his intelligence in constructing explosives, thereby demonstrating Roberts' violent nature to the country. This arguably presents as an excuse for the bombing in a way that simultaneously acknowledges and avoids the political aspect of the event. In an attempt to disguise this aspect, Roberts is hidden in New Zealand's history, as Beautrais details in 'History Books':

¹⁸⁹ Beautrais, Interview.

¹⁹⁰ Campbell, p. 88.

¹⁹¹ Campbell, pp. 88-89.

¹⁹² Ibid., p. 89.

In his article 'Neil Roberts and the Maintenance of Silence:
Social Regression in Muldoon's New Zealand',
Ryan Bodman is disappointed
at the editing of history.

You are not in Michael King's *The Penguin History of New Zealand*,
the 1970s to 1990s, 'A Revolution Confirmed.'

You are not in James Belich's *Paradise Reforged*.

You are not in the *Bateman Encyclopedia of New Zealand*.

You are not in *The Dirty Decade: New Zealand in the Eighties*.

You are in *New Zealand History Online*,
under the arm of the computer. You are in *Te Ara*,
under Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism. (Unspecified: which.)

Admitting Roberts into our histories, argues Bodman,

'highlights the complexities of the past. . . .

By making room for his story,
a different image of the past is presented.'¹⁹³

Beautrais concedes that Roberts held strong opinions, and emphasises his actions as politically driven; Buchanan and Freegard state in 'Man' that "he grew to have no respect for any form of government", and that "if he hadn't done it at the Computer Centre / then he would have done it at the Beehive. / He wanted people to ask why he did it".¹⁹⁴ However, due to the freedom of poetry, Beautrais can preface these acknowledgements with details of a softer Roberts:

¹⁹³ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 43

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

I suppose he was more anti-institutional than antisocial[...]

He displayed no violent tendencies – he even said he did not like guns[...]

He would just stand there as they hit him,
neither fighting back nor backing down.

He wasn't violent, he was warm and kind.

He'd never hurt anybody. He loved his parents.¹⁹⁵

In providing these details, Beutrais is constructing her own narrative based on her bias against the current political, national narrative that has controlled the way Roberts' story has been told in the past. As readers, we are faced with two options: to believe the New Zealand media, historically trusted to present us with accurate representations, or to believe those who knew Roberts intimately and who have provided, through Beutrais' voice and bias, a description of a happy young man dying for a cause he was passionate about. In order to obtain a clear understanding of the events of 18 November 1982, we must decide which of these two differing national narratives to place our trust in.

Flow: Whanganui River Poems

As *Dear Neil Roberts* provides a different perspective on how the creative freedom of poetry can alter the representation of a moment in New Zealand history, so too does Beutrais' fourth published collection, *Flow: Whanganui River Poems*. This collection provides a unique perspective on authorial presence and bias in reconstructing realities, as it considers multiple stories, and contemporary retellings of those stories, in order to provide a fragmented narrative that spans centuries. Beutrais is not only reconstructing history through her own specific lens,

¹⁹⁵ Beutrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, pp. 18-19.

but is combining years of differing cultural bias between Pākehā and Māori, who have arguably very different interpretations of the events that are dealt with in this collection. The navigation of this, in order to provide a well-rounded and equal history, formed a dominant part of her writing process. Beutrais has also demonstrated a specific bias in choosing to write about the Whanganui Region, a subject that stems from her personal connection to the community that *Flow* and *Dear Neil Roberts* are based within.¹⁹⁶ This connection to the history of Whanganui began when she returned home to the region after living away and developed a pre-existing interest in the death of Roberts, stating “I didn’t really think about it again for years until I was more involved in that community”.¹⁹⁷ Writing about Roberts and learning more about the history of Whanganui then encouraged Beutrais to write about the river and the region with a broader historical scope.¹⁹⁸ We understand bias to be a concentration on or interest in one particular area, which can be considered an indirect form of authorial bias towards a certain subject. An author may then have pre-existing opinions toward the subject determined by their socio-cultural contexts. As a result, in openly displaying an interest in the history of Whanganui, Beutrais implicitly demonstrates a bias of her own. This is in the context of unconscious bias – “the influence of sociocultural frameworks on individuals [...] the familiarity of which renders such cultural bias transparent to them”¹⁹⁹ – echoing Hall’s theory regarding the impact of individual contexts on the production process during communication.

When asked what emotions she was feeling most strongly when writing the collection, in order to determine what senses and biases may have been encoded into the text during the creative process, Beutrais mentioned a sense of inadequacy about writing as a Pākehā poet,

¹⁹⁶ Beutrais, Interview.

¹⁹⁷ Beutrais, Interview.

¹⁹⁸ Beutrais, Interview.

¹⁹⁹ Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, *Dictionary of Media and Communication*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), Oxford Reference Online
 <<http://www.oxfordreference.com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/>> [accessed 22 June 2020] s.v. unconscious bias.

and as if it was not her place to write a history of the Whanganui Region.²⁰⁰ This sense of inadequacy and an awareness of both the Pākehā and Māori perspectives when writing *Flow* led to a hesitancy during the writing process; she treats the material delicately and with respect, just as she did when relaying the story of Roberts in *Dear Neil Roberts*. However, without the inside knowledge she had about the punk-anarchy scene to aid her own recollections in *Dear Neil Roberts*, she may not have been able to represent the story of Roberts with accuracy and respect. Likewise, *Flow* switches between Beautrais and subjects she has a wide knowledge of, such as ecological changes, in order to ground part of the text in accuracy and avoid misrepresentation of the Māori perspective as much as possible.²⁰¹ This has caused a more precise framing of the history of the Whanganui region and as a result she draws back from her readers. Whereas *Dear Neil Roberts* allows her readers to see through her eyes—to touch what she touched and to feel what she felt—Beautrais’ hesitancy to represent a differing cultural perspective creates a barrier between the reader and the events that happened on and surrounding the Whanganui River. She attempts to write without expressing a specific moral or message that may imply bias:

It’s a tricky one because you don’t want to make it a total whitewash; you don’t want to just write a Pākehā history of an area. But then again, you don’t want to say, ‘I’m going to write this definitive narrative of this place and these people’, because you don’t have the right to do so... I felt like it was important while working with the material not to be didactic.²⁰²

In doing so, Beautrais aims to replace bias with balance, yet we are reminded by Starkey that what may seem to be objective to one reader may be considered subjective by another; bias

²⁰⁰ Beautrais, Interview.

²⁰¹ Beautrais gained a degree in Ecological Science from the Victoria University of Wellington and worked as a science teacher, according to her Victoria University Press biography.

²⁰² Beautrais, Interview.

and balance are interchangeable. The collection itself spans the lifetime of the river and the region, and Beutrais' own history is drawn into that, replacing balance with examples of ideological and unconscious bias as we are taken between two different pasts—historic and contemporary—throughout the first section, 'I. Catchment'.²⁰³ Furthermore, she views the history of Whanganui with hindsight, as a different person and with a different perspective to who she was as a child growing up in the region. The poem 'Confluence' demonstrates the ease with which Beutrais draws on the facts from her own life:

Although this place is called Cherry Grove,

there are only a few cherries,

and not the edible type. Looking down Whanganui,

one bank grows willows and Japanese walnuts;

the other, corn and half a tōtara, unbranched

by the wind. It's the end of a dry summer [...]

Standing at the confluence,

you can see the join in the rivers; either side

a different colour and speed.

Like standing at Cape Reinga watching two oceans [...]

Joe's misplaced the tray from the smoke,

so he builds one of willow, and we eat the trout

²⁰³ *Flow* is divided into three sections, each focusing on a different aspect of the life of the river: colonisation ('I. Catchment'), the ecological changes ('II. A Body of Water') and the people ('III. The Moving Sand'). Regarding the inclusion of bias and treatment of themes mentioned in the journalism code of conduct, I will be focusing on and providing examples from the first section and the second section where relevant.

a few metres from where he caught it,
with bread, and wild greens harvested from New World.²⁰⁴

Beautrais has followed the same method as she followed with *Dear Neil Roberts* in moving between these personal anecdotes and the anecdotes of historical figures. Her own stories are seamlessly woven into the rest of the collection; this could be interpreted as an attempt to clarify her history in relation to the history of the Whanganui River, and the community in which she grew up and has returned to. Beautrais asserts that this familiarity with her own material and with her bias and voice as a poet allowed her to take more creative liberties with the topic. She is able to write without the cultural constraints that the historic anecdotes impose, or the responsibility to portray information as accurately as possible—to present historical details or knowledge as factual.²⁰⁵ As a result, her own history appears often and we understand these scenarios to be accurate and truthful, due to the inclusion of relatable details and scientific fact. By contrast, the rest of the “piecemeal narrative” in the first section may be interpreted as fiction, as we understand these are character-driven stories not expressed in the traditional New Zealand histories.²⁰⁶ Beautrais was often writing about historical events with only basic information at hand, such as names and dates; the stories drawn on to build the collection were amateur and alternative histories that likely would not be found in a mainstream textbook:

What was included in the collection was a bit random, but it’s like writing about a life. There’s so much that takes place over the course of a life, you can’t write something that’s the length of a lifetime so what do you choose to include and what do you choose to leave out? It might be what is significant overall, or it might be what is interesting, or strange, or different to other experiences you may read about.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ Beautrais, *Flow*, pp. 21-22.

²⁰⁵ Beautrais, Interview.

²⁰⁶ Beautrais, Interview.

²⁰⁷ Beautrais, Interview.

Beautrais openly displays a bias toward writing about the recorded histories about the Whanganui River and its surroundings, but also histories that may not follow or be included in the national, European narrative of New Zealand. *Statistics New Zealand* recorded 23% of the region's population as Māori or of Māori descent at the 2013 census;²⁰⁸ this was also the year the events of 'Confluence,' 'Plotline,' and 'Roads' occurred. As a resident in Whanganui, Beautrais would have had personal insight into and interactions with a significant Māori population, which may have swayed her perspective and her bias toward representing a different history than what was found in mainstream texts. In shaping the collection solely around these personal anecdotes from those living in Whanganui, and her own experiences in the region, she views the material through a personal, politically driven lens. This lens belongs to the woman who associates the river and the region with home, rather than a poet who is held accountable by her readers to provide a representation of the truth, although she does aim for cultural sensitivity and accuracy.

Cultural sensitivity is the underlying reason for the piecemeal approach. Beautrais was careful to treat the two differing racial perspectives, and any material that didn't derive from her own cultural background and experience, with respect.²⁰⁹ In order to still provide her readers with a collection spanning the lifetime of the Whanganui River, she needed to select stories that included a range of events and characters, even if she wasn't able to write in their voices:

²⁰⁸ Stats NZ Tatauranga Aotearoa, '2013 Census QuickStats About a Place: Wanganui District', *Stats NZ* (2013) <http://archive.stats.govt.nz/Census/2013-census/profile-and-summary-reports/quickstats-about-a-place.aspx?request_value=14203&tabname=Culturaldiversity#gsc.tab=0> [accessed 22 April 2020]

²⁰⁹ Beautrais, Interview.

A Māori writer once said that a Pākehā writer has been writing in the voice of Te Kooti [...] it's really inappropriate for a Pākehā writer to write in the voice of an actual historical [Māori] character, especially someone that was that important.²¹⁰

While Beautrais' voice is prominent throughout the collection in her own histories and anecdotes, the narrators of the poems also include a surveyor, a prostitute, a soldier, and a farmer, amongst others. Beautrais provides clues as to their ethnicity through the inclusion of information such as Homer's instructions on the way to build a funeral pyre; the Māori population may not have been exposed to knowledge of the Greek writers and philosophers before colonisation occurred. We can therefore assume that these characters have socio-cultural backgrounds of the Pākehā population at the time. Additionally, we understand that Beautrais was determined not to write in the Māori voice, which leads us to believe that these additional narrators are a mixture of white figures. This therefore makes *Flow* an example of poetry written by a Pākehā writer, through the voices of Pākehā characters, attempting to represent Māori issues such as land wars and colonisation. As a result, we begin to question the truth of the Māori perspective within the collection. However, New Zealand author Patricia Grace suggests that cultural perspectives can be disguised within the content by not providing specific racial descriptors,²¹¹ thereby creating instances where a Pākehā may be able to write in the voice of a Māori character, and vice versa. We can see instances of this throughout *Flow*. The poem 'Pigs, potatoes'²¹² provides a clear example of how a combination of factors can create confusion as to race and ethnicity, thereby changing how a reader interprets the story:

²¹⁰ Beautrais, Interview. Beautrais does not name the Māori writer; however, this topic was replicated in a 2020 interview with author Patricia Grace. Grace stated that she has not kept track of discourse around writing in the voice of a different race, however she was accused early in her career of having said that Pākehā writers should not write about Māori characters. Grace claims she had instead said that some writers were not depicting Māori characters credibly and without bias.

²¹¹ Charlotte Graham-McLay, 'Patricia Grace's Literary Legacy: Giving Māori Characters Their 'Natural' Voice', *The Guardian*, 23 February 2020 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/23/patricia-graces-literary-legacy-giving-maori-characters-their-natural-voice>> [accessed 24 June 2020]

²¹² Subtitled Te Kumi, 1883.

No one will look

for us out here,' sighs Newsham. And he's right,
how many miles we are from any track [...]

The chiefs have been talked round,
but it would seem not everyone's disposed
towards this railway. And so the survey's nosed
a little further, only to be found

Out by Tekau-mā-rua. Now here we are.
'My pipe was in my coat,' my cellmate cries,
hands jerking uselessly. They must despise
me most of all, since that time at the pā

At Parihaka, where I was the one
who placed the survey pegs, which they removed.
I work at freeing a hand. By day, it's proved
successful. Then the light reveals a gun
poked round the door. A man walks in.
'It is I, it is I, my children,' comes his voice.
It is Te Kooti. All of us rejoice.
I greet him choked with tears as thick as sin.²¹³

As we read, whether we are of Pākehā or Māori descent, we imagine the narrator to be a European settler through the use of descriptors such as the name Newsham, the pipe, and chiefs

²¹³ Beutrais, *Flow*, pp. 28-29.

needing to be ‘talked round’, which implies tension and a differing of opinion. We also know that these characters are being held captive, therefore we can assume that in the context of colonisation and land wars the ethnicity of their captor must be the opposite ethnicity to the narrator. It is entirely possible, however, that the narrator is a Māori character and their captors are Pākehā settlers; it is my personal socio-cultural background and education that decodes this as the opposite and, indeed, I have determined that Beautrais avoided writing in the Māori voice. However, the inclusion of Te Kooti who is renowned as an important figure in Māori history creates confusion as to how a reader should interpret this poem. As a youth, Te Kooti is said to have taken Pākehā possessions as repayment for grievances toward Māori; his lawlessness caused offence to both Māori chiefs and Pākehā, and he gained influential enemies of both ethnicities. His official biography suggests that, in the years that followed, he aided both Māori and Pākehā as he knew the land, had experience in trading and was thought to be able to read English, thereby possessing “an unusual knowledge of his opponents”.²¹⁴ This statement suggests that his opponents were Pākehā settlers and the government; indeed, the previous poem in the collection, ‘Hat on a map’,²¹⁵ reads:

No Pākehā. No surveys.

No land court, and no railways.

No liquor, and no Crown.

The rivers spine on spine.

Somewhere, Te Kooti shelters

from the colonial soldiers.²¹⁶

²¹⁴ Te Ara, ‘Story: Te Kooti Arikirangi Te Tūruki’, *Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand* (N.D.)

<<https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/1t45/te-kooti-arikirangi-te-turuki>> [accessed 22 April 2020]

²¹⁵ Subtitled *Te Rohe Pōtae*, 1870s.

²¹⁶ Beautrais, *Flow*, p. 27.

By the year 1883, in which ‘Pigs, potatoes’ is staged, as per Beutrais’ subtitle, Te Kooti was seen as a religious prophet and healer, and was formally pardoned. In this scenario, the men could be of either ethnicity, as Te Kooti had followers of both Māori and Pākehā. Without this background knowledge as to Te Kooti’s movements during the year 1883, Beutrais’ readers may continue their interpretation of the events from the previous poem, and will be unable to determine the reality of the event the poem describes, impacting on their understanding of the history surrounding Whanganui and the river.

While Beutrais intended this collection to be seen and interpreted as poetry, we understand through Hamburger that narratives told through first person narrative can also be interpreted as factual, and Beutrais attempts to report these events with honesty as much as she can, in line with traditional journalism ethics. However, due to the lack of concrete details for each anecdote, except names, dates and places, and in order to remain respectful to the Māori history, Beutrais had to fill each poem with characterisation in order to make it a complete narrative. She suggests that this was a considered choice to avoid limiting the creative potential of the work; keeping the actions of her characters as factual thereby decreased the risk of a reader decoding the wrong information, as the collection remained a factual retelling of the history of Whanganui:

If you’re reading [a text] like a creative would, you’d want to feel like you’re there in the scenario with the person and experiencing things through their senses. You have to make up things like what they were thinking or feeling, or what clothes they were wearing, or what was their purpose on that day [...] I think there were whole narratives I made up, but the things that happened to them were things that had been reported as happening to real people.²¹⁷

²¹⁷ Beutrais, Interview.

As readers we feel a sense of experiencing the scenario alongside the characters, as Beutrais skilfully constructs the poem ‘Into the ground’.²¹⁸

Our ‘hotel’ is a canvas tent, and every brew we sell
is made from—if you’d like a glass, it’s best if I don’t tell [...]

I’m with a fellow lying in the shadow of the wall
when by the bar a scuffle forms, and swells into a brawl.
A lantern is knocked over, then a flagon of potcheen
and soon the flames are licking all around the whole shebeen.

Jane shrieks like there’s a knife in her, the man beside me stands
and offers his assistance, holding out his leathery hands [...]

I look back over my shoulder, and the whole town is alight,
bright orange like a ship’s flare in the black and silent night.
I see women in their nightgowns, their hair all loose and wild,
under one arm a bundle, and the other a screaming child.²¹⁹

In reading this poem, it seems unlikely that Beutrais did not have access to many details in the historical record in order to describe the fire and the extent of its destruction. We decode information about the event through the inclusion of small details; ‘hotel’ and ‘lying in the shadow of the wall’ implies prostitution, while the third character’s ‘leathery hands’ reference manual labour. In the context of this poem it seems perfectly truthful that the fire was started by a brawl, as detailed in the scenario with which we are presented. Indeed, the *Te Ara Encyclopedia* details the first Pākehā settlers in the area as railway construction workers, and

²¹⁸ Subtitled Kākahī, 1905.

²¹⁹ Beutrais, *Flow*, p. 35.

the town was known ironically as “The Holy City”, implying debauchery was rife.²²⁰ However, there was never a recorded cause for the fire; in constructing this fictitious narrative we are led to believe specifics about the event that may never have historically occurred. In comparison, the poems that are focused completely on one character and do not reveal any specific detail about actions and events can be decoded as purely fiction, such as ‘This’ll do me’.²²¹

Keys are often kept in trouser pockets,
and this is where I find them, in the dark
cloth shape slung over a chair. In double bed
the postman and his wife breathe, out of time.

Their bedroom has a human smell, of sheets
and scalps. I’d rather rob an empty house—
you feel the silence welcome you, almost,
when first the window gives, then you ease in [...]

Three hundred pounds. Why thank you, now I’ll go.
I tiptoe out, exhale into the night.
A short way down the road, a van is parked
outside the store—delivery, looks like.

This’ll do me.²²²

²²⁰ Te Ara, ‘Kōrero: King Country Places’, *Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand* (N.D.)
<<https://teara.govt.nz/mi/king-country-places/page-7>> [accessed 22 April 2020]

²²¹ Subtitled Ōngarue, 1962.

²²² Beautrais, *Flow*, p. 60.

The background of this poem lies in the tale of the “legendary” George Wilder, who “escaped custody three times during the 1960s”, according to a *Timaru Herald* article.²²³ Following his first escape, he was next seen on July 10, 1962 in Ōngarue within the Whanganui Region. Beutrais’ readers who have prior knowledge of the escapades of Wilder may be able to decode the event behind the poem from her words; however, because she does not provide any grounding detail or context for Wilder’s actions, only naming him in what can be interpreted as a song by Howard Morrison, it is unlikely that her readers will read truth into this description. Neither Beutrais, nor her readers, may know whether Wilder did indeed break into the house of a sleeping postman and his wife, or whether he took three hundred pounds, more, or less. As a result, this narrative can be interpreted as either fiction or historical truth, according to the reader’s own level of knowledge.

As Beutrais papers the gaps of contextual research with fictionalised details, we are drawn back to Plutarch’s attempts to translate a biographical history into his own constructed reality. Sprott reminds us that in doing so Plutarch attempts to relay a better story, or include a specific moral—however Beutrais is doing the opposite, ensuring the collection does not appear didactic in any sense. Her collection is split across two cultures and yet as readers we are only able to access one through the eyes of the other; therefore we are unwittingly involved in any cultural bias felt towards Māori by the Pākehā. An example of this can be found in the poem ‘First sod of the Main Trunk Line’.²²⁴

²²³ Al Williams, ‘Stewart Has Way to Go to Match Wilder’, *The Timaru Herald*, 14 May 2009
 <<http://www.stuff.co.nz/technology/2402862/Stewart-has-way-to-go-to-match-Wilder>> [accessed 13 May 2020]

²²⁴ Subtitled Pūniu, 1885.

There were these painted men, each with a crown
 of feather, on the barrow. Dark red skin.
 They didn't look like any men I'd seen.²²⁵

Poetic context enables us to decode the narrator as a young Pākehā boy, who perhaps has not come across Māori before and therefore is displaying ideological bias as a result of his upbringing. The voice of this young boy labels these Māori characters as 'other' and as a result we also see these native Māori as different, in a similar way to the treatment of Chinese detailed by Tse in *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes*. Unlike Tse, who drills down into this binary comparison and addresses the theme of racism that is prominent in his story, Beautrais returns to keeping a distance between Pākehā and Māori voices throughout the rest of the poem and the collection. However, the break in cultural sensitivity reminds us of the cultural biases that Beautrais must incorporate in order to provide a complete history of the region. The poem 'Fire' from the second section, 'II. A Body of Water', reveals the amount of detail Beautrais is able to provide to her readers when writing about a Pākehā character through an obviously Pākehā lens. This poem details the journey of Richard Taylor, a missionary from England who was present at the discussions on the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840, and who was stationed in the Whanganui region by Bishop Selwyn in order to maintain peace between the Māori and Pākehā who lived there.²²⁶ Beautrais reflects this aim for cultural peace through her portrayal and balance of the voices of each ethnicity:

God cut a clump of reddish clay
 breathed moist on it and made a man.
 This truth fits neatly with native knowledge;

²²⁵ Beautrais, *Flow*, p. 33.

²²⁶ Te Ara, 'Story: Taylor, Richard', *Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand* (N.D.)
 <<https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/1t22/taylor-richard>> [accessed 22 April 2020]

they will take to heart what Taylor teaches [...]

But a headier call was heard by him

to leave his enviable English existence

and go South as sure as the compass spins

to the worst country the world owns [...]

Ever searching for souls to bring

ashore,

he hears a dying chief

call for an end to war

in spite of old belief

and what has gone before [...]

And near to his home gives new names:

Hiona, Ātene, Hiruhārama

Raorikia, Ramahiku

Karatia, Ranana: Christian cities

made malleable for Māori speakers.

In time

the old names surface less [...]

At Christmas the church at Pūtiki is crowded

with Christian Māori come to the call

while over the river the rush to the races

keeps the Pākehā apart from his preacher²²⁷

²²⁷ Beatrais, *Flow*, pp. 102-106. This poem has been displayed as it appears in the collection; in comparison to '1. Catchment', the final two sections use poetic techniques such as white space and movement of words on the page to emphasise particular narratives. Beatrais used the ballad form in '1. Catchment' as it is the form of traditional hymns, and oral poetry was often written in patterns of four with recurring stresses or recurring rhyme schemes, and she felt the ballad form best represented the way the settlers of the time would speak.

From this poem, we are provided with more insight into the Māori perspective that may otherwise have been left out. In writing through the perspective of a Pākehā character, Beautrais is perhaps more comfortable to expand on how the relationship between the natives and the settlers in Whanganui was managed, and the work that Taylor did within the region. She is not writing about a single event as she does in the earlier section ‘I. Catchment’ and is instead using creative techniques such as the use of white space in order to emphasise certain parts of the life of Richard Taylor. However, while Beautrais herself narrates this poem, the Pākehā character who features sees through the lens of colonisation, and displays a bias toward the ‘enviable English existence’. We are led to decode the Pākehā voice as dominant; in doing so, this suggests the Māori existence is a binary ‘other’. Indeed, the character of Taylor goes on to show repulsion for the native Māori custom of working unclothed:

Locals cling to old customs like working unclothed.

One day old Ake is digging in his garden

when Taylor commands him to put on a mat.

In the struggle to shove the man out of sight

his coat is ruined with the ripe red clay

that Ake has spread all over his skin,

to shade

it from the heat of day,

his sacredness displayed.

A man cut out of clay

just as his God had made.²²⁸

²²⁸ Beautrais, *Flow*, p. 106.

While the poem itself demonstrates an effort at balancing the existence of both ethnicities, we are ultimately presented with an attempt to reshape native Māori into more presentable citizens in the eyes of the Pākehā, at the direction of the English-led Church and Government.

Beautrais not only endeavours to balance the Māori and Pākehā voices without causing cultural offence; she also seeks to create a gender balance within the text. She realised during the initial research process that the records are the male record, as men were traditionally the members of society who received an education and were able to record the written histories that are drawn from today.²²⁹ As a result, the majority of the primary and secondary sources that researchers, journalists and poets turn to are already in the male voice. While some of the characters are women Beautrais herself discovered, some are fabricated in order to provide a balance in the male/female voice and perspective:

[The inclusion of gender balance] is something I'm interested in myself. It also tells a fuller story, because if you're telling the story of a whole population, not just half of it, you're going to get a richer and more diverse story.²³⁰

Just as Beautrais' choice of topic implies a personal bias toward the subject, so does her admission of interest in the subject of gender balance. We must also remember that the narratives that these fictional women exist in are constructed to suit these new characters, therefore the only truth we are being presented with still is the male voice. If we interpret these narratives as history being written, we are only presented with the true male record because the female record is still one constructed by Beautrais. If these are not intended by Beautrais to be written histories, her readers are being presented with constructed realities that we could

²²⁹ Beautrais, Interview.

²³⁰ Beautrais, Interview.

individually interpret as historical record, but that have no grounding in fact—compared to Plutarch’s hills and rivers.

However, Beautrais has not constructed complete fictional narratives, stating that while she focused more on the construction of narratives when the Māori voice was involved, she only wrote what other historians had written about; anything else could be seen as upsetting to people within the region and isn’t usually found in the public sphere.²³¹ She explores the dehumanization of people through environmental movement such as forestry and farming. This combines her own bias around ecological subjects with a history of colonisation told repeatedly through a predominantly male Pākehā perspective. However, Beautrais explains that their experiences are “still something that we can learn something from”,²³² and creates situations in which we explore these perspectives through constructed characters and character biases.

²³¹ Beautrais, Interview.

²³² Beautrais, Interview.

Chapter 3

In order to gain insight into the research and writing processes of Tse and Beutrais, interviews were undertaken with each author, with ethics approval granted before the interviews were conducted. These interviews provided insight into journalism practice; this combination of journalism and poetry provided a way to disseminate the findings of my study in a way that non-academic audiences can understand, in line with Archetti's views. It not only allows my own readers to understand the authors about which I write, but determines my own place in the research process; just as Tse decoded journalistic responses to the murder of Joe, I decode his words and intentions, and the words and intentions of Beutrais, with reference to particular poems. Likewise, my readers are informed through both academic information and their bodily reactions, when they read my research and the examples of Tse and Beutrais. This combination enables them to fully understand and participate in the decoding process.

These interviews were analysed for similar themes; personal interest in a subject, community and history were the most prominent in both discussions. Race was another key factor in how each author interpreted their source material and encoded messages into each text. An analysis of these themes has therefore been divided into Culture and Identity—structured as such because the individual identities of my chosen authors have been influenced by the cultures in which they exist; this in turn has established specific biases that are reflected in their texts.

Culture:

“Why is a Pākehā writing from a Māori perspective in fiction any different from a male author writing from the perspective of a woman?”²³³

Bonny Norton, paraphrasing Monica Heller, argues that people growing up within an analogous society “would not define themselves as ethnic” and that “ethnicity is a product of opposition”.²³⁴ In other words, ethnicity only comes into effect when a society is confronted by the ‘other’. It is this kind of opposition that defines the perspective through which Beutraais constructs the history of Whanganui within *Flow: Whanganui River Poems*. While *Dear Neil Roberts* presents a challenge to the white national narrative, due to Beutraais existing within the punk-anarchy culture, Beutraais lacks the cultural insight with which to write the Māori experience. As a result of her hesitancy to write in the Māori voice, *Flow* is constructed predominantly through the Pākehā perspective – a perspective which Norton argues is defined by common structures such as language:

Thus the first principle of ethnic identity formation is participation in ethnic social networks, and therefore in activities controlled by ethnic group members. Language is important here as a means by which access to networks is regulated: If you do not speak the right language, you do not have access to forming relationships with certain people, or to participating in certain activities.²³⁵

Furthermore, the spoken and written word are not the only forms of language available through which to make connections; ethnicity draws mostly on observable features that appear different

²³³ Nadine Anne Hura, ‘Who’s Allowed to Tell Our Stories?’, *E-Tangata* (25 October 2015) <e-tangata.co.nz/arts/whos-allowed-to-tell-our-stories/> [accessed 27 June]

²³⁴ Bonny Norton, *Identity and Language Learning: Gender, Ethnicity and Educational Change* (England: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), p. 12.

²³⁵ Norton, *Gender, Ethnicity and Educational Change*, p. 12.

to our own identity, such as skin tone, behaviours and customs. Limited by the features of our own cultures, and therefore without access to forming these relationships or participating in differing cultural activities, we remain bound by our own physical socio-cultural contexts. Adrian Blackledge suggests that we undergo a process of normalization regarding these features, during which “it comes to appear natural that certain cultural and linguistic practices dominate others [...] and provide greater access to symbolic resources”.²³⁶ Cultural unification between populations is accompanied by the positioning of the dominant language and culture, and therefore the rejection of the ‘others’. However, this culture is determined by the ethnicity that deems itself dominant; we must remember that multiple ethnicities in multiple scenarios may see themselves as the leading culture—one is not superior in all parts of the world. Comparatively, Norton suggests that imagined communities are collectives created by shared ideas and beliefs, creating a sense of community with people we may never physically meet.²³⁷ These societies are not defined by observable features but by something like a national narrative that we are taught to follow, no matter what the colour of our skin is. While this idea of imagined community serves to reduce barriers between ethnicities and enable populations to form relationships and participate in activities with each other—such as a dawn service commemorating veterans on ANZAC Day—the national narrative we are presented with rebels against the idea of ‘physical’ culture and ethnicity. This national narrative is what Beutrais openly seeks to challenge and write against. A study by Blackledge found that an imagined community valued the idea of the ‘same’—found in shared beliefs and practices—over diversity, and “positioned particular cultural practices as aberrant”, thereby negatively categorizing those who engaged in these practices, leading to racism.²³⁸ Therefore, we may

²³⁶ Adrian Blackledge, ‘Imagining a Monocultural Community: Racialization of Cultural Practice in Educational Discourse’, *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 2.4 (2003), 331-347
<doi:10.1207/S15327701JLIE0204_7> (p. 332)

²³⁷ Bonny Norton, *Identity and Language Learning: Extending the Conversation* (England: Multilingual Matters, 2013), p. 8.

²³⁸ Blackledge, pp. 331-332.

connect with *Flow* and *Dear Neil Roberts* due to similarities between the narratives and what we experience in our own lives, but essentially we remain within the physical boundaries of our own socio-cultural contexts. The longer we remain within these contexts, the more they are ingrained within us; it becomes disrespectful for writers to attempt to break out of these contexts through literary explorations into other cultures.

Nadine Hura argues that writers should be able to write from the perspective of another ethnicity without issue, *only* if they are able to construct the voice and experience of that culture realistically, and with respect and credibility. The question therefore arises: how much connection does an author need to have with the subject material, in order their chosen topic to be considered an acceptable match for them? She queries:

If a Pākehā shouldn't write about Māori experiences, what right do you, or I, or anyone else have? Do authors need to be Māori in a particular way, or have a certain amount of whakapapa or 'Māori blood' before they're permitted to tell Māori stories? If so, wouldn't all our stories start to sound the same?²³⁹

While Hura is considering the cultural divide between Pākehā and Māori within New Zealand, these are questions that can be applied to any ethnicity and culture in a variety of genres based in fiction. Journalists—writing from their own perspective—create characters within articles but are bound by ethical codes and principles; they must at all times seek to accurately represent their characters and all their observable and cultural features. Poetry, however, does not hold authors to a sense of duty and responsibility except their own, allowing a writer to adopt the perspective, voice and experience of any character they choose. This can be problematic if they do not have the cultural insight or sensitivity towards the culture they are adopting. Novelist

²³⁹ Hura, para. 16.

Hari Kunzru states that a negative view on cultural appropriation²⁴⁰ makes writing impossible, as characters become clones of the author in an effort to avoid writing about that which we do not know, or ‘own’.²⁴¹ AL Kennedy suggests that by the very act of reading or writing, we are consenting to imagine or portray someone other than ourselves, and that if a character or culture is written well, a reader “can share emotional and psychological space with a character”.²⁴² If I were to only write characters who reflected my ideologies, biases and values, I would be limited to a Pākehā perspective, having grown up in spaces where features of whiteness were dominant. I have attended schools that were predominantly white; I have learnt a history that is in line with the nation-building narrative discussed by Beautrais. Yet the colour of my skin does not necessarily make me a candidate to write about the experience of those who live in Europe, and I am unable to speak to the Māori, African or Asian experience, simply because I have never existed within or created a connection with the cultures. I am therefore unable to provide an accurate description of the observable features of these cultures, and create realistic characters that do exist in these spaces, without proper and diligent research. While it is possible for any writer from a variety of genres to pick up a pen and write the perspective and voice of a different culture, I posit that they must either have prior knowledge, or have undertaken research into the culture about which they wish to write. When writing *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes*, Tse drew on personal experience of rituals within his Chinese culture to aid him in supplementing a narrative based on fact with culturally accurate fiction. Similarly, Beautrais has used her experience within the punk-anarchy scene to explore the reasons behind

²⁴⁰ Margaret Drabble, Jenny Stringer and Daniel Hahn, *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), Oxford Reference Online <<https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/>> [accessed 30 June 2020] s. v. cultural appropriation. Defined as describing the taking over of creative or artistic forms, themes or practices by one cultural group from another, usually used to describe Western appropriations. The term carries connotations of Western culture being the dominant culture.

²⁴¹ Hari Kunzru and others, ‘Whose Life is it Anyway? Novelists Have Their Say on Cultural Appropriation’, *The Guardian* (1 October 2016) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/01/novelists-cultural-appropriation-literature-lionel-shriver>> [accessed 29 June 2020]

²⁴² AL Kennedy, cited in Kunzru, para. 18.

Roberts' actions in *Dear Neil Roberts*. While each of these collections was intended to be read as fiction, and may be encoded as such, neither Tse nor Beutrais can determine that their readers will decode the collections in the same way, as author Linda Grant states:

The whole point of fiction is that you make it up, but at the same time readers have become passionate for authenticity, for hearing the truth of other voices, other lives (and for treating them, at times, like autobiography or non-fiction, the novel as a learning aid, in history and geography).²⁴³

Grant specifically refers to the novel; however, the implication is that fiction as a whole can be used as a method of information-gathering, as trust in the media declines and people turn to citizen journalism and other sources for details, data and to increase their knowledge on particular subjects. The practice of journalism is bound by ethical guidelines, and we understand the principal responsibility of journalists is to make clear the distinction between fact and opinion, in order to present a balanced account of a particular person or event, without improper emphasis or distortion.²⁴⁴ However, journalists struggle with this due to constraints of space or word limits; they cannot include all details and so turn to stereotypes. Poetry and other fictional genres are not limited in the same way as journalism and authors risk disrespectfully representing a culture that is not their own through the overt use of stereotypes and other tropes, when they may have the space to include further details. Naomi Alderman argues that writers “need to have learned enough to understand where these false ideas come from and why it’s so pernicious to replicate them”.²⁴⁵ Taking Tse’s retelling of Joe and Terry into account, Tse has followed the ethics of journalism in providing a balanced story; while

²⁴³ Linda Grant, cited in Kunzru, para. 26.

²⁴⁴ These responsibilities are a combination of the main points of the two ethical codes that New Zealand journalists must adhere to: the E tū Union Code of Ethics and the New Zealand Media Council Statement of Principles. These codes were previously described in Chapter 2.

²⁴⁵ Naomi Alderman, cited in Kunzru, para. 29.

there is still an obvious lean toward Joe's side of the story, Tse is up front about the reasons behind this potential bias. The inclusion of Terry's perspective provides context for the event and avoids making the story a one-dimensional representation. While his collection could use poetic freedom to emphasise Terry as the villain, or include stereotypes as a form of fictional entertainment as journalism articles of the time seem to do, breaking the aforementioned codes of ethics, Tse remains predominantly neutral throughout his poetry and refrains from playing up or stressing Terry's involvement. He found it important within his research and writing processes to balance the two opposing voices of Kum Joe and Terry—of Chinese and European ethnicities—as it helped him to understand historic aspects of Chinese immigrant culture, as well as his family's own contemporary interpretation.²⁴⁶

A writer must also carefully consider the culture they have chosen to represent, and whether that culture has been wounded by their own. The first section of Beutrais' *Flow*, featuring stories about the Pākehā colonisation of New Zealand, provides a striking example of the recolonization of Māori within literature. Not only did the Pākehā culture create the initial wound, but Beutrais' hesitancy to use the Māori voice means the Pākehā voice is also narrating the wound, thereby creating renewed oppression and racism toward Māori. However, if these stories aren't told, there are massive gaps in our histories. Poetry offers a chance to fill these better than any other medium, as the genre provides freedom to explore history in a "charged or continually interesting way".²⁴⁷ Tse reclaimed a story of cultural racism and oppression from the dominant European voice; similarly, Beutrais needed to represent the Māori of the era in *Flow*, in order to avoid a white-washed collection about the Pākehā perspective of colonisation. The region was, and is, inhabited by both ethnicities, and that balance needed to be reflected otherwise Beutrais would not be writing about the history of

²⁴⁶ Tse, Interview.

²⁴⁷ Beutrais, Interview.

Whanganui and the river, but a version skewed toward the ‘dominant’ culture. This idea of creating balance and representing a community as a whole is something addressed by both Tse and Beautrais:

I feel a sense of responsibility in my writing, not only being visible but ensuring there is representation for Chinese writers, Asian writers, queer writers. I think the responsibility is to tell stories in a way that doesn’t remarginalize groups, or exploit them, or create a power imbalance.²⁴⁸

Likewise, Beautrais reflects on writing *Dear Neil Roberts*:

I was thinking that this is a story from a community that I’ve been part of, and if we don’t tell our own stories they may never be told. If stories are of your time, place, people, community—I think you do have a responsibility to record those in some way.²⁴⁹

Nikesh Shukla suggests that this responsibility is relevant to stories that are not from our own cultures, heritages and backgrounds, but writers must ask themselves whether they are writing about a differing cultural experience “through a white gaze”, thus making it “palatable for a largely white publishing industry”.²⁵⁰ As a second-generation Chinese-New Zealand citizen, Tse wrote *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes* from his personal position that death should be openly discussed, referencing the conflicting contemporary and cultural perspectives as a point of interest. In doing so, he wrote about a cultural experience through his own frame of reference, rather than writing with the Chinese view on privacy and silence; as a result, just

²⁴⁸ Tse, Interview.

²⁴⁹ Beautrais, Interview.

²⁵⁰ Nikesh Shukla, cited in Kunzru, para. 43.

as they kept silent in 1905, the Chinese community has not demonstrated any interest in the collection because the event is still a historic moment that they do not want to address.²⁵¹ We must consider, when reading or writing ourselves, what purpose the work is written for. While authors and poets may write with the objective of adding to, or addressing, a larger discourse about oppressed cultures and communities, they may also be at risk of making their stories about their own individual culture or ideologies, thereby negatively affecting the culture they are attempting to portray.

Identity:

**“Who we are affects how we write, whatever we are writing,
whether it’s a letter to a friend or a dissertation.”²⁵²**

In relation to the act of writing, the ‘who we are’ is created from a combination of the positions and relationships formed “as a consequence of our social class, ethnicity, gender, physical build, abilities and disabilities”—in other words, the socio-cultural context in which we live, and through which we perceive the world around us.²⁵³ Gloria Park suggests that:

identity is [...] connected to how one has been socialized in the community, which is layered with certain values, beliefs, dispositions, and power relations that allow one to move in and out of social contexts.²⁵⁴

Roz Ivanič concurs, adding that “identity is not socially determined but socially constructed [...] the possibilities for the self are not fixed, but open to contestation and change”.²⁵⁵ Some

²⁵¹ Tse, Interview.

²⁵² Roz Ivanič, *Writing and Identity: The Discoursal Construction of Identity in Academic Writing* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1998), p. 181.

²⁵³ Ivanič, p. 182.

²⁵⁴ Gloria Park, “Writing is a Way of Knowing’: Writing and Identity’, *ELT Journal*, 67.3 (2013), 336-345
<<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275133275>> [accessed 28 June 2020]

²⁵⁵ Ivanič, p. 12.

of these values and beliefs will be constructed by a writer over time while some will be dominant to the context in which a writer finds themselves. These contexts are likely to have a recurring effect on the writer's sense of personal history and belonging, and will then have a run-on effect of shaping experiences within their life histories, relationships, values and beliefs, all of which "bear down on the point of the pen" and influence the content that is written.²⁵⁶

My own context when writing this thesis is one of a woman of Pākehā heritage, living in New Zealand. I have an interest in poetry and other writing genres; this information can be easily gathered about me from what I encode into this paper, and I imagine it should be clear enough to be decoded by my readers. Likewise, we are able to gather from the collections *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes* and *Dear Neil Roberts* that Tse is of a specific ethnic heritage, and Beautrais had formed relationships with members of the punk-anarchy scene within New Zealand prior to writing *Dear Neil Roberts*, or was at least affected in some way by members of that subculture. *Flow: Whanganui River Poems* offers a different insight as it provides information about a wider community, yet we decode a personal interest in ecology through Beautrais' use of specific facts regarding climate change. Both collections describe Beautrais as a mother, and from this we can infer that her sustained interest in the topics of climate change and anarchism are a result of her two sons and ensuring that they grow up in a better world than the worlds described in either collection. I write this to describe the ease with which a reader can decode information about an author; yet an author has no prior knowledge of their readers and as a result does not know what they can allude to when writing. They do not know their readers' positions on such topics as dominant cultures, racism, anarchism and ecology, or on poetry as a whole. Differing perspectives on these issues dictate how their readers will react to the words they write and to the discursal identities they are constructing as writers. Neither

²⁵⁶ Ivanič, p. 182.

can they assume their readers are of a particular ethnicity or culture and write for them; indeed, both Tse and Beutrais retell these stories for their own understanding and as a way to connect further with their cultures, communities and identities. As both readers and writers ourselves, we need to be aware of the role that identity plays in both the construction and the decoding of texts.

Park and Ivanič propose three forms of identity that make themselves known in the act of writing. The first is the ‘autobiographical self’ which forms the basis of the definition prior; this is the aspect of identity “associated with a writer’s sense of their roots, of where they are coming from”.²⁵⁷ This sense of self is not fixed, but is under constant development as a consequence of a writer’s evolving life history. In addition, it does not only represent the events creating their life history, but the way in which they represent those events to themselves, thereby placing undue emphasis on certain parts. In summary, the autobiographical self acts as the producer of a self-portrait, rather than the self that is portrayed. Tse and Beutrais offer striking examples of this form of identity as they each approach their respective subjects with hindsight, drawing on the knowledge of the autobiographical self to detail emotional reactions to their respective events. Tse’s conscious choice to retain specific aspects of Terry within the story and focus the narrative on the character of Joe is a particularly clear example of how the use of the autobiographical self can affect the narrative of a recorded history. We understand Tse’s choice to focus on the Chinese voice as a result of wanting to reclaim the story for Joe. Additionally, this was influenced by events in his own life history that made themselves known during the writing process, including the immigration of his great-grandfather and grandfather to New Zealand, and the death of his grandmother.²⁵⁸ The collection then expanded to include

²⁵⁷ Ivanič, p. 24.

²⁵⁸ Tse, Interview.

reflections on these events alongside specific details of the murder. Similarly, Beutrais describes *Dear Neil Roberts* and *Flow: Whanganui River Poems*, as:

[ways to reconnect] with the place, as its where I grew up [...] It's a bit like coming back to a place where you have a history from a different part of your life and trying to connect it with the person that you have become.²⁵⁹

Within each collection, Beutrais constructs moments of her life history according to the context of each poem and provides representations of how she experienced each event, which ultimately serve to connect her autobiographical self with the events and community about which she writes.

The second form of identity that Ivanič describes is the 'discoursal self' that forms the impression which a writer both consciously and unconsciously conveys to their readers.²⁶⁰ While the autobiographical self is constantly under development as a writer's socio-cultural context is affected, the discoursal self is tied to a specific text, describing the self that is represented within that self-portrait. Ivanič acknowledges the discoursal self as focusing on how a writer wants to sound, rather than a representation of a particular stance the writer is taking. This self is formed through the specific discoursal decisions a writer makes during the writing process, relating to values, beliefs and power relations in the social context in which they are written.²⁶¹ In the poetry genre, these decisions include language choices and the visual placement of words on the page. This has the most impact on the way in which a reader perceives the author and their text, thereby forming an important yet fleeting part of the writer's overall identity. Beutrais offers a particular example of her discoursal self as a mother by

²⁵⁹ Beutrais, Interview.

²⁶⁰ Ivanič, p. 25

²⁶¹ Ivanič, p. 25

including memories shared with her two children. In writing about her autobiographical self through direct and descriptive language, Beutrais invites her readers to experience these moments with her and her sons, emphasising the maternal aspect of her discursal identity and helping her to understand her own particular motives behind each text. Likewise, Tse and Beutrais both credit their collections and the corresponding freedom of poetry to an ability to investigate tangents relating to each story, and an exploration into personal interests. Tse's inclusion of a tangent describing Joe and Terry as lovers demonstrates an optimism within his discursal self, whilst a conscious decision to structure the narrative as he did both sustains his readers' attention and holds together individual poems that were written "to be really uncertain and open up the possibilities of the different worlds that the book could inhabit".²⁶² Beutrais adopts the technical language used in conjunction with computers and technology in order to express an interest in the "rapid technological change within the space of [her] own lifetime".²⁶³ We understand writing is a form of discovery and analysis of non-fiction material; in addition, the act of writing helps an author to understand how they want to be perceived by their peers. As authors, they shape their discursal selves and content accordingly, as Tse and Beutrais have done in their respective collections. Parks argues that this understanding of the discursal self then reveals the third form of identity, the 'self as author', as a writer understands the different layers of their identity that are de- and re-constructed through the writing process and the authority they have over their text.²⁶⁴

Beutrais' tangents around computers and technology in *Dear Neil Roberts*, and specific ecological facts within *Flow*, are especially interesting to note in relation to the 'self as author'. This is the final layer in how a writer's identity informs the writing process and the

²⁶² Tse, Interview.

²⁶³ Beutrais, Interview.

²⁶⁴ Park, p. 5.

content of a text. Ivanič introduces this concept as relative, in that “writers see themselves to a greater or lesser extent as authors, and present themselves to a greater or lesser extent as authors”.²⁶⁵ In simpler terms, writers differ considerably in what material they will claim as their own during the writing process, which can affect the establishment of authorial presence in a text and the authority that they provide to their self as author:

Some attribute all the ideas in their writing to other authorities, effacing themselves completely; others take up a strong authorial stance. Some do this by presenting the content of their writing as objective truth, some do it by taking responsibility for their authorship.²⁶⁶

The self as author is therefore likely to be informed by a writer’s autobiographical self; events and relationships may or may not have generated content for an author to write about, and a lack of experience may lead an author to restrain the self as author, instead crediting other materials.²⁶⁷ We see this illustrated with Tse; he writes with knowledge on the subjects of race and discrimination that are themselves a large part of his own life history. As readers we are drawn into a narrative that we see as coming from Tse himself; though his material is drawn from other sources he is confident in his authority to write about these topics. Tse himself states that:

There was a bias, and I think because I’m writing about race and identity, I can’t avoid a bias. I’m coming from a very particular perspective when it comes to this sort of topic.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁵ Ivanič, p. 26.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 26.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

²⁶⁸ Tse, Interview.

With an understanding of autobiographical and discoursal selves, we can infer that each of these layers of identity has helped Tse to establish his sense of authorial presence, and has led him to recognise the level of bias that he includes in *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes*. Additionally, Beutrais offers a unique perspective as to how her autobiographical and discoursal selves have created her ‘self as author’. Within *Dear Neil Roberts* and *Flow: Whanganui River Poems*, she includes a strong authorial presence when writing about her own history and experiences, yet is quick to attribute material to other sources, going so far as to cite these directly within the poem—an example of which can be found in ‘Plotlines’:

According to the National Institute
for Water and Atmospheric Research, we can expect,
by the year 2099, a 2.2 degree average increase in temperature,
shortened duration of seasonal snow, rise in snowline.²⁶⁹

Archetti argues that poetry derived from non-fiction material can provide a platform for a writer to reflect and interpret information. As the decoding of information from the National Institute for Water and Atmospheric Research can be counted as a specific experience within Beutrais’ life history, we can consider Beutrais to be writing about her autobiographical self and responding to the event through her discoursal self, which impresses upon her readers her concern over the issue.

These three layers of identity can help us to interpret the motives of an author and the socio-cultural context through which they are encoding the information. This will then have bearing on the way in which we are supposed to decode each text and our response to each retelling of New Zealand’s history. Furthermore, every word written becomes an encounter

²⁶⁹ Beutrais, *Flow*, p. 24.

between “past experience and the demand of a new context” as Tse and Beautrais write about historical events through a contemporary perspective.²⁷⁰ To illustrate Ivanič’s point, Park discloses her written reconstruction of her identity as a Korean immigrant to the United States in the late 1970s; in doing so, she writes with hindsight and new knowledge of her developed socio-cultural context. Her reconstruction then becomes situated in a contemporary context, influenced by Park’s developed knowledge, and takes on a social and political nature. Likewise, Tse wrote *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes* not only to reconstruct the story of Joe but to give voice back to the Chinese immigrant community. In addressing a culturally charged part of New Zealand history in his collection, he brings the story to the forefront of the nation’s mind and situates the event in a contemporary context, a century after the event itself occurred. Within this century, societal changes to employment, immigration, race and overseas travel have meant that “mechanisms exist for people to move into new contexts” and to “[renegotiate] their identities”.²⁷¹ Tse is therefore not writing with the autobiographical self of Joe, Terry or a bystander within the Chinese community of the time, and this serves to change his own reaction to the event. Indeed, Tse aligns it with recent occurrences such as the Christchurch mosque shootings on 15 March 2019.²⁷² As his readers are also interpreting his words with this modern identity and worldview, the story of Joe and Terry is translated into a contemporary setting and the actions and emotions are conveyed much more strongly than if those readers were to read a historical text, or journalism article.

²⁷⁰ Ivanič, p. 181.

²⁷¹ Ivanič, p. 16.

²⁷² Tse, Interview.

Conclusion

“Is verse the future of history?”²⁷³

With the knowledge we have of the communication process, we can see how the texts of Chris Tse and Airini Beautrais have become altered representations of the historical events that each of the collections describe, as they have been affected by each of the authors' individual contexts. Applying Hall's construction process, we may argue that the texts have been individually encoded in a format that is designed to drive the meaning that is decoded by their readers. The aesthetics of *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes*, *Dear Neil Roberts* and *Flow: Whanganui River Poems* encourage a reader to decode each text as fiction. Yet Tse and Beautrais draw on non-fiction events for their creative outputs because of a basic human need to make sense of, and understand, the world around them. The likelihood of perceiving a text as fact when we are able to recognise stories from our own histories and socio-cultural contexts blurs the line further as to how we should interpret poetry. We naturally see poetry as fiction and a journalism article as fact, and place our trust in the latter medium to provide an accurate description over the former. However, close analysis of the texts, the source material behind each collection and the authors themselves reveal that we may be placing our trust in the wrong medium, changing our understanding of the events that Tse and Beautrais depict. The freedom of poetry compared to the rigid structures of journalism allows for further development of both narrative and characterisation, and transforms the events into personal accounts determined by the cultures, ethnicities, religions, values, and in this instance the geographical connections of Tse and Beautrais. These same factors contribute to our identities and contexts as readers, with which we decode the messages and intentions of Tse and Beautrais. As a result, both readers and authors need to be aware of how narrative and characterisation through poetic techniques

²⁷³ Brown, qtd. in Beautrais' *Flow: Whanganui River Poems*.

can change the historical event represented, according to the limitations and biases of the author. I should add that the content of this thesis has been determined by the way in which I have interpreted and decoded the words of Tse and Beutrais, which may differ from the interpretation of my reader. That is, of course, the reason that poetry can be so highly subjective.

There is no disputing that an author is unable to know every detail about the event that features in their fictional novel or poetry collection. Whether a text is constructed solely from researched material or from a combination of both non-fiction sources and personal anecdotes, there are inevitably details missing from the sources that the original writer or journalist chose not to include as a result of unwitting or ideological bias. Additionally, the use of each source is a form of bias in itself, as an author overlays their own pre-conceived opinions onto the research they undertake and the sources they use when creating their own retelling. The first retelling of an event, whether orally or on the front page of a newspaper as breaking news, will differ considerably to the retelling we are exposed to years later simply because of the number of voices and biases that have touched the story, shaping it into new forms, new contexts and new mediums. We have come to expect stories to be changed in some way by the time they reach us, which in turn gives writers permission to invent fictitious details in order to write a better story, or add a moral for their readers, or to take elements away entirely to suit one specific purpose. Beutrais' poems 'Into the ground',²⁷⁴ 'Eggs for an army',²⁷⁵ and 'Bush tram',²⁷⁶ invent the female record of the early history of Whanganui in order to provide a gender balance that she felt her research material lacked, while Tse constructed *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes* around his family history and the death of his grandmother. This ability to alter

²⁷⁴ Beutrais, *Flow*, p. 35.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

the stories and histories we are presented with in order to explore our own understanding of concepts and the context in which we exist creates contention between fact and fiction, as these moments of authorial presence remain unclear to the reader.

I discovered the works of Chris Tse while completing postgraduate study. One discussion in a poetry workshop introduced me to a text of his in which his culture and his entire sense of self were made obvious within the poems. I was then encouraged to read *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes*, and this personal encounter with a moment in our national history, untouched nearly a century after the murder itself occurred, would go on to alter the way in which I read and interpreted poetry. An unrelenting need to discover more about the murder led me to journalism articles and a copy of Terry's pamphlet *The Shadow*.²⁷⁷ I was simultaneously horrified and excited to find that the event Tse describes in poetic detail occurred, for the most part, as he wrote it. I was struck by a need to protect the voice of Joe Kum Yung and reclaim his story in the best way I knew how, as Tse was when he first discovered the story for himself. This thesis has provided me with the opportunity to engage with other historical moments unheard and unseen by the public, through the collections of Airini Beutrais. My examination of the use of historical events in poetry has revealed a trend for authors to write using non-fiction material as a starting point for their works, and for practicing journalists to employ creative language and the poetry genre in order to dissect the information gathered. In doing so journalists, and indeed any writer who draws on non-fiction or scientific data, are able to reflect on their findings and understand the information more fully; Brady reminds us that we are informed through both the intellect and the bodily senses. This inevitably leaves room for authorial presence and specific biases to make themselves

²⁷⁷ A digital copy of *The Shadow* can be found through the State Library of Victoria, Australia.

known, as each writer constructs a different narrative based on the same data according to the influence of their socio-cultural contexts.

I concede that not all authors draw on non-fiction material, or moments in history, in order to write fiction. In fact, I applaud any author who has the imagination and the understanding with which to craft an entire text that does not draw on history or legend. My aim within this thesis is to highlight the importance of the research process for those authors of fiction who do draw on data and non-fiction material, using the texts of Tse and Beutrais to illustrate this. Each poet's texts demonstrate how they have used research to build characterisation or to progress the narrative, such as in '*All together now*', 'Man' and 'By way of explanation'. Beutrais includes a note in the back of *Dear Neil Roberts* referencing the other voices and biases that have been encoded into the text, while Tse includes occasions in *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes* that were only made available to him through newspaper reports of the time, the return of Joe's body to China the most prominent of them all. These sources have been bound by ethical codes that hold their writers to certain standards of neutrality and accuracy, and ensure that emphasis is not placed on specific aspects that may distort the flow of truth and fact. Journalists are able to present new information and write about different aspects of identity and culture because these codes protect both the writer and the voices that they represent. In comparison, poetry—or any other genre that is deemed fiction by its audience, and is not held to an ethical code demanding accuracy—allows the writer to adopt any perspective and alter the facts of a historical event as they please, which can create controversy if the author does not have the cultural experience or the research to back up the claims they are making within their text. Beutrais negated this when writing *Flow: Whanganui River Poems* by writing from the cultural perspective in which she felt most comfortable – her own. Yet this limited her ability to present the full history of the Whanganui region as she reconstructed anecdotes that included a Pākehā character. As a result, she may not have

presented a full history of the region, or may not have constructed the narratives and characters entirely. However, research may not always reveal the full story to a potential author immediately. In this case the research process increases in importance, as the author should instead turn to contextual information of the time period, the culture or the location in which their work is set. *Dear Neil Roberts* and *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes* demonstrate the effect that this contextual research can have on the reception of a text by its audience; Beatrais drew on her own experience within the punk-anarchy scene in New Zealand, and Tse inserted moments of his own cultural experiences within the story of Joe and Terry, which help us to form a better understanding of the characters involved and the narrative. These moments are subtle in Tse's case and more straightforward in Beatrais' additions, but each author is able to say that they may have been true—not necessarily with certainty in the accuracy of the events they represent, but with certainty regarding their attempt to convey the full story as accurately *as they know how*, due to the contextual research they undertook prior to the construction and encoding process.

Hall's communication model suggests that authors must not rely on their audience to understand a text as it is intended to be understood, due to the differences in each person's socio-cultural context. An author cannot control the way in which a reader will decode a certain text any more than a reader can control the material within the text; the relationship between writer and reader exists only through the presence of the discursial self, and communication between the two parties is limited. Neither can an author control the reaction of a reader to the events described; it is in the best interests of both themselves and their reader for an author to maintain truth within their work as best as they can, without restricting the creative potential of the text.

Tse's and Beutrais' works, with their relevance to contemporary discourses around anarchism, revolution and race, have highlighted the importance of research and the maintenance of accuracy in historical fiction and poetry, as texts in these genres continue to be interpreted as non-fiction while textbooks gather dust in a corner of the classroom and traditional media sources decline in favour of personal, creative texts. We must move moments important to our histories into the contemporary landscape to ensure the next generation can learn from the stories of characters like Joe Kum Yung, Lionel Terry, Neil Roberts and the people of Whanganui.

After all, verse is the future of history.

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